

VIDEOGAME CULTURE
JULY 2007
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EDGE
NINTENDO | SONY | MICROSOFT | PC | PORTABLE | COIN-OP | DESKTOP | ONLINE
POWER
WHO DARES WINS
NINTENDO'S ROAD TO VICTORY
Wii





It has become fashionable to talk about Nintendo in terms of a shock turnaround and triumph in the face of adversity. Here, it is said, is a company that has stubbornly refused to play along with Sony and Microsoft, that has ploughed its own furrow and reached out beyond gaming's traditional, crudely-defined margins, that is all about the fundamental pleasure at the heart of videogaming rather than the peripheral accoutrements. And, in doing so, it is reaping the benefits.

All true. At the same time, though, it casts Nintendo as some kind of mangy underdog when in fact, looked upon with an even view across all of its gaming activities over the last 25 years, the House of Mario has rarely been anything other than supremely robust, even when some of its boldest experiments have fallen on their backsides. This month's cover feature (see p62) takes in the Nintendo story to date, and looks in detail at how it has maintained its focus, its willingness to take risks, and, at the end of it all, its ability to turn vast profits.

In this issue we also look at another headlining Japanese game company, Square Enix (see p72). Its component parts may have once been two of Nintendo's most loyal allies, but it is now dedicated to twisting and turning its *Final Fantasy* franchise in order to fit multiple platforms, in all sorts of flavours, and we attempt to make sense of its mind-bogglingly convoluted vision for the future.

Much more straightforward is an examination of the burgeoning Flash gaming scene (see p56), whose nuts and bolts bring to mind the golden age of game development, when getting ideas into the hands of players was often as important to their creators as selling stacks of copies for hard cash. A key difference nowadays is an easier route to making money. No, it's not Nintendo-style profit. But then there is only one Nintendo.



EDGE

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"They say if you resort to violence, then you've already lost."



When you have finished with this magazine please recycle it.





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START



INDUSTRY

Console piracy catches up

It's brought sweeping changes to both the music and film industries, but how is piracy affecting videogames – and is DRM the answer?

The pirate's world is hard to map. The producer's perspective, shown in apocalyptic adverts linking downloading movies to everything from the porn industry to international terrorism, sits ill at ease with many people's own experience of running off a copy of The Goonies for a friend. And yet this shadowy business has brought at least one industry to its knees, forcing music executives to rethink everything from distribution and pricing, right down to which bands to sign. Movie executives are feeling the pinch, too, as revenues disappear and tomorrow's big hit turns up today via BitTorrent channels.

Not only does piracy throw established business methods into disarray, it also raises the thorny issue of digital rights management (DRM) – a topic that is starting to seriously sour the relationship between content producers, who view it as a matter of safeguarding an investment, and consumers, who more often see their rights to content they've already purchased being eroded.

Both piracy and DRM are issues that the videogaming world is increasingly having to engage with. A poll conducted by Joystiq in August 2006 found that, of the 8,689 gamers consulted, 23 per cent played pirated games, compared to just 11 per cent who rented them. An earlier poll by Brunel University in 2005 was even bleaker: 84 per cent of UK teenagers admitted to owning pirated software.

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And the effects are already there to see. In a speech on the subject at GDC 2006, id Software's Todd Hollenshead said that the growth of videogame piracy and file-sharing meant that his company had no choice but to go multiformat with its next game, *Quake Wars: Enemy Territory*, which will be released on the 360 and the PS3 as

Hitman: Blood Money **on 360 was one of the first victims of piracy as the current generation dawned. Perhaps Agent 47 might approve**

For a time DS-Xtreme led the DS homebrew cart scene, thanks to its integrated mini-USB interface

Although modchips are now designed with ease of installation in mind, many are still put off by the apparent complexity of the likes of these Wii chips

One of the reasons for the success of DS piracy is that carts like the Cyclo Evolution are packaged with the same care as 'proper' products

well as the PC. Other developers are considering pulling out of the PC market entirely, as code leaks are gradually becoming regular features of the landscape.

But what about the consoles? Although historically their proprietary technology has slowed piracy down, there's no such thing as a machine that hasn't been beaten or emulated in the end. From Wisdom Tree's *Bible Adventures* on the NES to the travails of the original Xbox, which unwittingly cornered a small section of bookstore shelfspace with tomes like Hacking The Xbox, making its author Andrew 'Bunnie' Huang something of a celebrity, console copy protection has eventually suffered the same fate as that of the PC. The current generation of consoles is no different. If anything, the growth of hacking communities on the internet, geared towards documenting and disseminating their findings, means that new hacks and mods are coming thicker and faster than ever before.

The PS3, which of all the current generation has been on sale worldwide for the shortest period of time, has already had its share of problems, and its links with DRM have been of mixed success at best. Things started badly when an early, now debunked





The DS homebrew scene includes apps like the Messenger clone Beup (top left) as well as games like *Tales Of Dagur* (top) and a lavish clone of the *WarCraft II* Tower Defence mod (above)

rumour suggested that individual games would be bonded to a single console, thus cutting out not only piracy, but game-lending between friends and the entire second-hand market too. Equally, the controversial choice of Blu-ray discs was partly influenced by the new format's more powerful copy protection when compared to conventional DVDs, even though these improved security features make the discs hard to produce and can cause playback problems. All of this may be academic, however, as news emerged late in 2006 that Blu-ray copy protection had in fact already been beaten anyway, with both the AACS signal encryption broken, and critical weaknesses discovered in the HDCP 'protected pathway' system the format employs. And despite Phil Harrison's comments that the real copy protection for videogames on Blu-ray is the sheer size of the files themselves, Kotaku reported last November that hackers have already figured out how to use the PS3's Linux system (which may in turn become a wellspring for the emulation of other consoles) to dump PS3 game files on to external hard drives and run them (or rip them) from there.

With the 360, meanwhile, Microsoft's bullish launch talk of watertight security provided incentive rather than deterrent to hackers in search of a high-profile scalp as much as an illicit revenue

Nintendo's products seem particularly vulnerable to piracy, with both DS and Wii being cracked very rapidly after launch, and ripped software becoming very easily obtainable online

stream. The firmware for the 360 was successfully hacked in March 2006, and reports quickly followed of early titles such as *Hitman: Blood Money* being sold in China for as little as 30 Chinese yuan (£2). The stream of pirated games has only increased since then.

And Microsoft isn't the only victim of Asian videogame piracy. Ripped Wii games have been flooding the Chinese market, along with modified consoles. China raises significant challenges in the fight against piracy: 7.7 million counterfeit gaming products have been seized there in the last four years alone, and estimates suggest that up to 90 per cent of the nation's entire software market is made up of pirated goods. The sheer amount of pirated Wii software has even had an effect on the local price of the hardware itself, as easy access to cheap games boosts the value of the modded consoles. As with Microsoft, it may be too late for Nintendo to undo the damage.

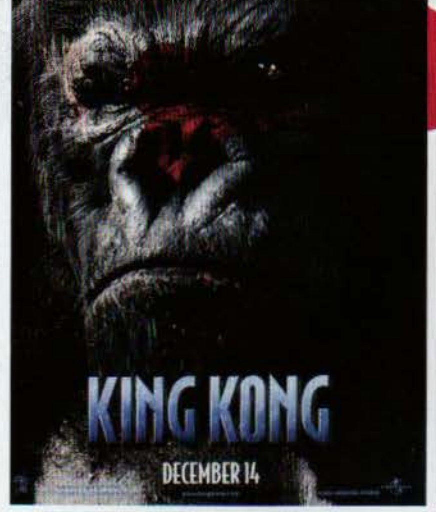
Meanwhile, the handheld market is equally troubled. DS encryption has long been broken and copied games can now be easily downloaded to flash memory cards and run via adaptors inserted into the GBA slot, while online the first handful of emulators are already available. And the PSP, whose software sales remain sluggish, has had no trouble becoming the platform of choice for homebrew and pirated games, made easy by uploading hacked versions of Sony's original firmware, which cuts out almost all of the copy protection code entirely.

Under constant attack, the platform holders have a narrow path to walk. No one can risk losing potential revenue – particularly given a business model which makes almost all of its profit from the blades rather than the razors – but they also can't alienate too many of their users with draconian DRM. And as Sony's experiences with Blu-ray shows, DRM's entire history is littered with hardware issues and consumer ill will. The vitriol regularly directed against copy protection utilities such as Starforce highlights how gamers continue to feel about the implication that the consumer is inherently dishonest. And consumer distrust continues to grow as DRM makes software less reliable, and not only restricts its use but may also monitor it as well, with many asking if piracy isn't merely an excuse for bringing in such measures.

7.7 million counterfeit gaming products have been seized in China in the last four years alone, and estimates suggest that up to 90 per cent of the nation's software is pirated



Wii modchips like the Wiinja also offer handy, but still frowned on, uses like the ability to store multiple, legally owned GC games on a single DVD for use with the console





HITMAN
BLOOD MONEY

At the moment, DRM critics are mainly turning their attention to that used by the movie and music industries, with HD-DVD and Blu-ray both coming under increasing criticism as weaknesses are found and exploited in their digital protection systems – bad news for Casino Royale and King Kong. News that Amazon is to start selling unprotected music downloads has also been taken as a sign that DRM's days are numbered. But will the games industry take onboard the lessons of its older cousins?

Another common complaint is that DRM only makes life harder for legitimate buyers, as those it was imposed to protect against have already beaten it anyway. Copy protection is an arms race, and the consensus is that the hackers inevitably win every time. While piracy on a grand scale involves organised gangs and relatively complex infrastructures, much of the technical work is initially performed by talented coders who simply relish a challenge. Ironically, many hackers

The modding communities that have already built up around the new machines suggest that tampering has become an established part of videogaming culture

continue to see the process as a game, and the modding communities that have already built up around the new machines suggest tampering with the contents of the box is now an established part of videogaming culture.

And as online communities become more and more expert at tackling consoles' defences, the war against piracy continues to suffer from bad publicity. From the days of Don't Copy That Floppy to the recent, largely unsuccessful, attempts to link piracy to more tangible forms of crime, the anti-piracy lobby has struggled to get its message across meaningfully, and recent news that ELSPA is cutting its anti-piracy staff only serves to deepen the sense of defeat.

Yet even as the current generation suffers its first losses, their new online focus may prove a key factor in securing lasting victories. Services like Xbox Live and the PlayStation Network bring with them not only a powerful deterrent to piracy, but, perhaps more fittingly given the ambiguity many consumers feel on the subject, potential incentives to stay legal. Making it possible not only to own the means of distribution more completely, but also provide patches quicker to close any security gaps piracy and hacking may open, they also offer a faster, simpler, and potentially cheaper, delivery of content.

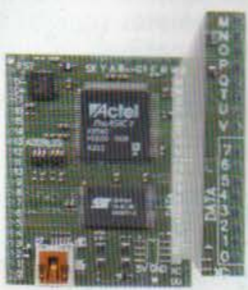
Alongside chip cost, the rise of processing speed, and the ever-growing monster that is the second hand market, piracy remains just one force affecting the games industry. But it is becoming increasingly influential in shaping not just the way that games are delivered and packaged, but the way publishers and developers may feel about backing riskier and more inventive material, knowing that some of the proceeds won't be going into their own pockets. And although many will argue that piracy remains a legitimate response to high prices and poor quality, anything that may one day significantly limit the creation of ambitious software must be some kind of crime.

Newswire



Ubi goes edu

Ubisoft has announced that it is expanding into casual gaming with the formation of a new division devoted to creating a range of educational games on Wii and DS. Ubisoft's educational focus contrasts with EA's approach, which, with the likes of its Pogo website, tends to aim only at entertaining the masses. The first projects from Ubisoft's new division will be two titles in a new line called *My Word Coach* and *My Life Coach*, self-improvement games that follow in the wake carved by Nintendo's *Brain Training*. The announcement further demonstrates Nintendo's success in opening up this market to commercial game producers.







360 mod chips, like Infectus, enable piracy. Microsoft recently began a clampdown on modified hardware, banning its users from Xbox Live



So far the 360 has yielded more easily to hackers than the PS3, but despite Sony's assurances it seems only a matter of time before that console's weaknesses are also exploited



"Nothing is more valuable in the entertainment world than an evergreen franchise"
Nintendo's **Reggie Fils-Aime** on *Pokémon Diamond/Pearl* selling 1.75 million copies in the US in its first month

'why bungie? we bought crackdown for this reason and now we are being denied...burn in hell staff members of bungie all of you'
A poster on the Bungie.net forum 21 minutes after the promised launch of the *Halo 3* beta

"Our goal in developing *The Simpsons Game* is to create the most original game ever..."
Scot Amos, executive producer of the project, quoted on Yahoo Business

"I could make *Halo*. It's not that I couldn't design that game. It's just that I choose not to."
Shigeru Miyamoto talks FPS development

"I just want to go on the record and say that Bungie is hard at work on a side-scrolling platform game featuring some plumbers – I'm not going to say what their ethnicity is, it's none of anyone's business. We took it as a gauntlet, a sort of glove slap, and we're going to respond in 2D scrolling style. That's all I'm saying."
Bungie's **Frank O'Connor** responds

HARDWARE

Teaching the world to play

Videogames lie at the centre of the quest to give every child a laptop

The One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) project and videogames: they're a natural fit. After all, the '$100 Laptop' is aimed at kids, and kids love playing games.

So it's no surprise that the OLPC development team, headed by MIT Media Lab founder Nicholas Negroponte, has integrated games at the heart of OLPC.

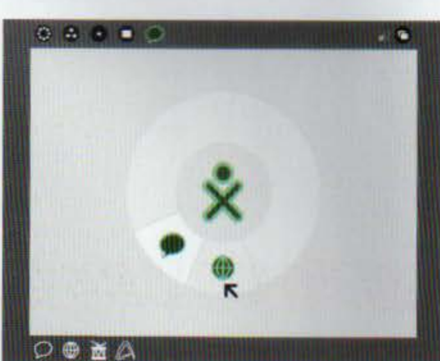
The first computer to be developed is XO-1, a Unix-based laptop with a high-resolution screen, flash memory, wireless networking, a touchpad and camera – an interesting set of features for games.

The project involves creating a cheap computer with a set of open source software and programming tools for children in developing countries. It aims to help redress the global imbalance of experience with computers and develop new standards of education.

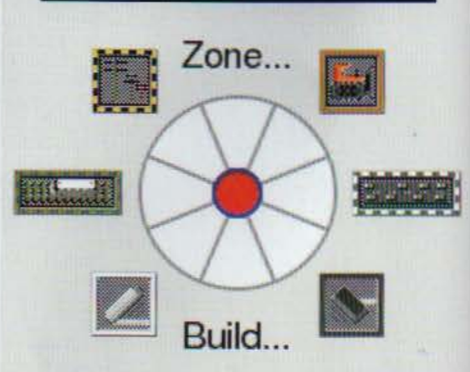
The idea is for children to not only use the laptop to browse the internet or use word processors, but to also delve into software source code to learn how it works and tweak and adapt it to their needs.

It's based on Seymour Papert's theory on constructivism, which says people learn best when they do things in the real world. "The goal is to entice children into engaging deeply in learning, and games are a wonderful enticement," explains **Walter Bender**, president of OLPC software and content.


Photography: Ben Cerveny







OLPC's interface, Sugar (top), was designed by graphic design agency Pentagram and Linux developer Red Hat. Diverging from traditional desktops, it is based around pie menus, as used in Don Hopkins' mock-up for his port of *SimCity* (right). EToys (above) is a programming framework that supports 2D and 3D graphics, video and sound. It's aimed at being an ideal environment for children to learn the ins and outs of games coding and design











OLPCities (above) is a Brazil-produced framework that allows children to create 'cities' made up of 'lots', each a standalone minigame, text document, picture or other form of media. They will be able to 'travel' between cities on other OLPCs in the same network, and collaborate by sending text messages to each other

The challenge at the moment is producing the software. "We're asking, how can a million kids use these tools, kids who have very little understanding of computers and games?" says **Ben Sawyer**, co-founder of the Serious Games Initiative. "The law of percentages says only two to three per cent will cotton on quick, but that sucks. We want 50 per cent – 100 per cent of kids. We've got to build new stuff."

How? "We don't yet know!" says Sawyer, who hopes that if children have the source code, they can choose to adapt it to their needs. "By making everything malleable, people will make it their own."

Another part of the challenge is to integrate OLPC's Sugar graphical interface, which works rather differently from the traditional desktop to encourage collaboration, to games. Several such projects are already underway, including a port of *SimCity* (see below) and *OLPCities*, a kind of simplified *Second Life* that allows children to create and visit 2D 'cities' made up of minigames, text or pictures.

Developers are also working on setting Etoys, a programming environment designed for children to create games, on the system, as well as PyGame, a set of programming modules for writing games written in Python.

The lessons learned about the role of videogames in education and making them open source will be valuable, says Sawyer: "The interest in what it can mean to build this kind of software could potentially – should – be even bigger than OLPC itself."

OUT THERE

JOY PADS



New York-based masters student Jenny L Chowdhury has created a game interface that encourages couples to play together by playing with each other. Inspired by support groups like Widows of WarCraft for people ignored by their game-obsessed partners, the project consists of a bra and a pair of shorts, each equipped with six touch sensors wirelessly linked to a computer. The couple feel up each other's designated areas to control a Flash game designed by Sinan Ascioglu. The use of undergarments makes the project curiously chaste – perhaps the next step is to design controllers that don't require clothes?

• www.jennylc.com/intimate_controllers/

DON HOPKINS, artist and developer



Hacker artist **Don Hopkins** announced at Game Developer's Conference in March that he'd been given permission by EA and Will Wright to port *SimCity* to the OLPC system. We talked to Hopkins, who also did a lot of the core programming on *The Sims*, about the project.

What does the port actually consist of?
I'm doing it in two stages: first the grunt work of fixing bugs and adapting the old [Unix] X11 version of *SimCity* to run nicely on the OLPC hardware, which was quite easy. Then the fun work of integrating *SimCity* with the Python scripting language, and re-implementing the user interface for Sugar and multiplayer features. It will also support scaling graphics for zooming in to any scale to edit the map, because it's necessary for the 200dpi screen, and to make it accessible.

Any multiplayer features?
Yes, I want it to support a bunch of kids playing together with different roles, each with different interfaces tailored to their role. So young kids can have simple user interfaces, like driving the bulldozer around and drawing roads with the game-pad arrows, or voting on city decisions. This lets them play along in the same game with older kids and teachers, who can have more sophisticated roles, like analysing maps and graphs, discussing city planning, coming up with ideas to put up for vote, campaigning and trying to win over other players by presenting logical arguments or making emotional pleas.

"I want it to support a bunch of kids playing together with different roles, each with different interfaces tailored to their role. So young kids can have simple user interfaces, like driving the bulldozer"

Are you implementing many other learning-based changes in this version of *SimCity*?
Yes, many exciting changes! Educators have been clamouring for an open version of *SimCity* that they can see inside, change and extend, and that's the goal of porting it to Python. But first we want to get the old version out there and in the GPL [a free software licence], to serve as a starting point that everybody can share.

What's the XO-1 like in terms of its power and functionality for games?
It has much more power than *SimCity* requires, since *SimCity* was originally designed to run on a Commodore 64. So once it's done simulating the city, there's a lot of leftover horsepower to present it nicely and implement an easy to use interface. I think the OLPC has a great potential for constructionist learning, educational software, creativity tools and games, just not the 3D firstperson shooter variety.

What was EA's attitude to the project, considering this is about fitting to the OLPC's open source, educational principles?
EA's attitude has been great – everyone there is behind it, especially Will Wright! It's not yet a done deal, because EA is a big company that hasn't done anything like this before, and it takes a while to go through the QA and legal processes. I hope that successfully re-licensing *SimCity* under the GPL will demonstrate why it's such a great idea to do this for games and other software, so they can be used by millions of kids on their OLPCs!



ONLINE



SOE changes course

The deposed king of MMOs unveils plans to alter its fortunes

The speed and assurance with which *World Of WarCraft* dominated the online gaming market often seems to render the time before Blizzard's ascendancy as the dim and distant past. Yet it was only three short years ago that Sony Online Entertainment's *Everquest* was synonymous in the western world with online roleplay. It may seem that SOE's star has fallen somewhat – for several years it's acted as curator of an MMO museum, and its few stabs at creating new titles out of apparently sure-fire franchises like Star Wars have failed to capture the interest of either their fans or the gaming public at large.

The company has, however, proven itself to be impressively dedicated in its support of existing games, and even *EverQuest*, now eight years old, has maintained a modest but undwindling

This autumn will see the release of the 14th EverQuest expansion, and there's no sign of this commitment diminishing, with an intention to put out an expansion every year from 2008

playerbase. This autumn will see the release of its 14th expansion, and there's no sign of this commitment diminishing, with an intention to put out an expansion every year from 2008 onwards. *EverQuest 2* has new zones and playable races in the offing, with an expansion called *Rise Of Kunark* planned for release in November. *Star Wars Galaxies*, the rights for which SOE acquired from Monolith in 2005, is to gain a creature-raising minigame and a story-telling tool, allowing players to construct their own adventures out of prefabricated assets.

In spite of such efforts, the revenue from these aging titles cannot last indefinitely and, with this in mind, new ideas and directions were announced at SOE's recent Gamer Day in New York. The roadmap for SOE's future has several main objectives, all of which work towards the goal of insinuating SOE into as many different areas of the industry as possible. Instead of focusing efforts on a small cadre of killer applications, SOE is trying to establish itself across the breadth of the online market by three main devices: a fervent effort to globalise, concentrating particularly on Asia; a closer alignment with the Sony brand, offering more titles for PS3 and PlayStation Network; and an increased effort to establish itself in the casual gaming space.

Of the projects that were subsequently announced, one succinctly captures the essence of SOE's change in focus: a multiplayer adaptation of Chinese mega-hit, Kung Fu Hustle, under development by SOE's Taiwanese branch, SOGA, which previously gained minor notoriety for its anime versions of *EverQuest 2* character models. The game offers martial arts action of an inoffensive and heavily caricatured kind. As frivolous and family friendly as the movie was, it plays as a 3D side-scrolling fighter in co-op mode and offers a more freely explorable world in versus. Importantly, it's entirely free to play – the set number of lives you have per day can be increased either by purchase or by victory in combat – a fact which guarantees it to attract a demographic of



SOE was tight-lipped about a rumoured acquisition of *Vanguard* developer Sigil, and somewhat ashen-faced when asked about its teething troubles; its premature release meant little optimisation

Newswire

THE 2ND ANNUAL
HOLLYWOOD
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SUMMIT

Hooray for Hollywood

June 26-27 will see the Hollywood and Games Summit in California. There are two keynotes: the first, The Interactive Parallel Universe, will be delivered by Clive Barker, the man behind the incoming *Jericho*; the second, Driving Mythology Forward, will be delivered by Mitch Davis, chairman and CEO of Legendary Pictures, and panels will discuss digital distribution and similar themes. Games and screen projects represented will range from *Gears Of War* to Lost.

It all smells like big money, from the 'Deal Makers' martini reception (sponsored by EA) to the language of 'accelerating collaboration.' But then again, having the likes of Guillermo del Torro and John Gaeta next to Dave 'Shiny' Perry and Lorne Lanning seems like a logical step.





Gods And Heroes, SOE San Diego's upcoming MMO, pits you against all manner of classically-inspired nasties. It'll be out in the US this summer, but release and distribution in Europe are not confirmed



OUT THERE

ADVENTURE REPRISE

The first ever action adventure game has just received a sequel. This new chance to find the chalice might be unofficial, and run on the Atari 5200 instead of the 1980 original's 2600, but *Adventure II* comes with an old-school lack of colon-and-subtitle name and in a luxurious package which includes a full-colour manual, parchment maps, and a couple of fridge magnets – one featuring Grundle the dragon. The race to find the game's Easter eggs starts here...

• www.atariage.com

customers who might otherwise baulk at spending money on games.

Such attempts to broach casual or non-gamer demographics are bolstered by SOE's experimentation with alternate markets and distribution methods, such as mobile games and PlayStation Network. Already occupying the number one spot for thirdparty downloads from the PlayStation Network, SOE announced another five titles to come over the coming months, while its Los Angeles branch commits itself to creating games specifically for the casual and mobile market. It's difficult to get particularly excited about their offerings: highlights included a *God Of War* phone game, which looked to play similarly to *Castlevania*, and *Snoop Dogg: Cruisin'*, a game in which players compete for the Snoopster's approval through the handling of their hydraulically-enhanced pimp-mobiles. Meanwhile, SOE Denver, formerly Worlds Apart, is committed to probing as-yet-unexplored MMO territory by bringing trading-card games to the PC, of which the upcoming *Stargate* game is the most prestigious.

If this all seems a little banal for a company that once dominated the online scene, creating franchises that defined genres rather picking the necrotic flesh off old licences, then there is at least some hope on the horizon. Two titles that are, at the time of writing, still under press embargo, offer something rather refreshingly different from that mentioned above, and a teasing confirmation of a *DC Universe Online* game, suggest that SOE has not lost its ambition within the mainstream MMO scene altogether.

Similarly, more innovation is evident in the development of its proprietary software launcher into a fully-fledged media distribution and lobby system set to rival Steam. Scheduled to come out of beta this summer, Station Launcher intends to centralise access to games, downloadable content, friends lists and eventually even integrate support for a variety of instant messenger applications, including AIM, ICQ, Yahoo Messenger and Xfire. Much later, it is planned to offer all kinds of other media content, including movies, music and thirdparty software via this platform.

It's a move that, if successful, guarantees SOE a revenue stream in a longer term than any game. And this is really the crux – SOE is looking for longevity and stability, and even if its currently-announced games aren't of genre-defining excellence, the way the company has spread its bets ensures that it will keep ticking over for some time to come, perhaps just waiting for that game that will once again make SOE a ubiquitous synonym for online gaming.



A decent attempt has been made to recreate *God Of War*'s epic violence for mobiles, with bloody combo attacks and finishing moves aplenty. However, the limiting factor is always going to be the tech's refresh rate and controls

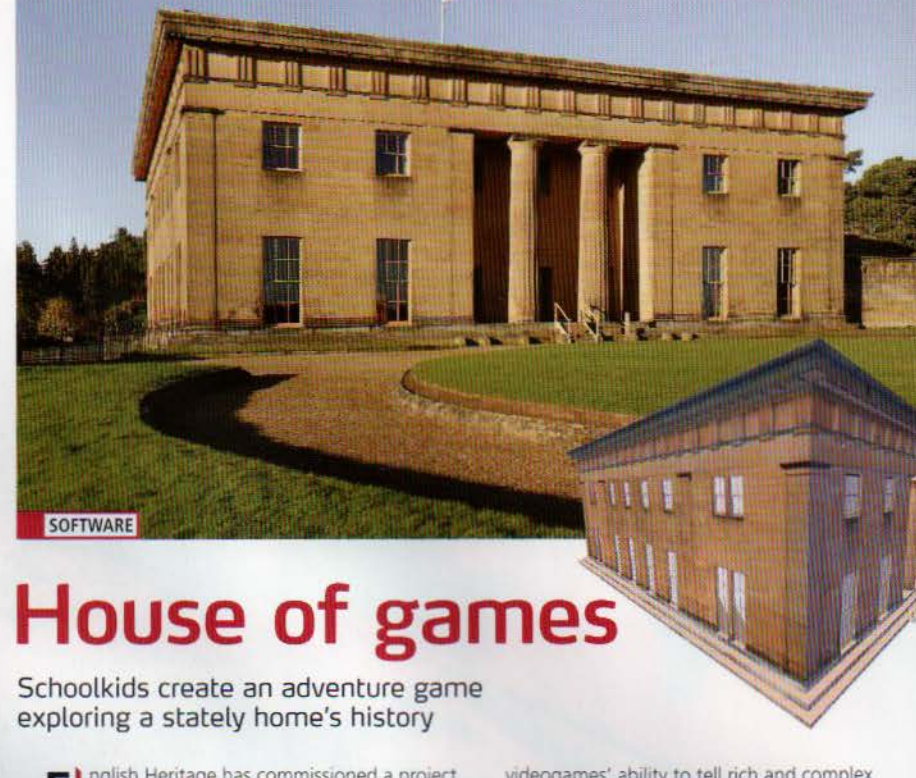








The pupils, from the nearby Ashington Community High School, worked on the project through workshops with Steve Manthorp (pictured on right of group shot), Carl Gavin of Lateral Visions (centre) and the English Heritage curators who work at Belsay Hall



SOFTWARE

House of games

Schoolkids create an adventure game exploring a stately home's history

English Heritage has commissioned a project in which local schoolchildren have created a videogame to interpret the history of Belsay Hall in Northumberland.

The Middleton Mystery is an adventure game in which players must explore a 3D recreation of the hall and its gardens in order to relocate seven treasures. Its story and puzzles were entirely devised by the teenagers, aged between 13 and 16, and realised with the help of game artist **Steve Manthorp** and entertainment software company Lateral Visions.

The game focuses on the history of the hall, using videos of ghostly inhabitants to tell the story, from World War II soldiers to members of the family that lived there, the Middletons.

"History and heritage are to be enjoyed and shared by everyone, regardless of age, and using such a contemporary method makes this project particularly relevant to young people"

"It's a profoundly ugly building," says Manthorp. The hall was first built as a medieval castle in the 14th century, enlarged into a mansion in the 17th century and had a Greek Revival villa added in the early 19th.

The seven treasures are all mythical artefacts the game supposes were collected by Sir Charles Monck, who built the villa, on his travels in Greece. The game is a linear set of puzzles based around listening to the ghosts' clues.

English Heritage's motives for commissioning the project are based around videogames' popularity among the young. "History and heritage are to be enjoyed and shared by everyone, regardless of age, and using such a contemporary method makes this project particularly relevant to young people," says **Lynne Minett**, education manager for the north of England.

Such an attitude rather understates videogames' ability to tell rich and complex spatially-based stories. But Manthorp feels the game's real value is less about education than it is about the kids who made it: "It's not going to change any of their lives, but they really got into it and it has provided them with a experience they would never otherwise have had," he says, explaining that it gave one of them, a girl who loved videogames and had suffered extensive bullying, a rare sense of involvement because she understood how games work.

The Middleton Mystery is part of Picture House, the latest in the hall's progressive series of themed exhibitions, which focuses on film, art and design and opens in July. While it will be playable on three PCs at the hall, it will be available to a much wider audience as a download from the exhibition's website (www.picturehousebelsay.co.uk).

Manthorp also hopes to be able to have the game distributed on magazine coverdiscs, a strategy he used with a previous project, *Shooting Gallery*, in which Cartwright Hall Art Gallery was recreated as a *Unreal Tournament 2004* map and released with PC Format.





Lateral Visions, which consists of ex-Codemasters staff, has realised almost all of Belsay Hall and its grounds for the project, including the stables, which were used as billets during WWII



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

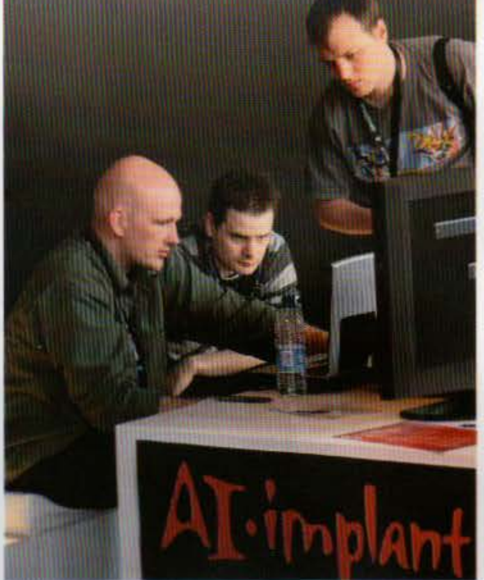
Fans, film production staff, celebrated comic authors, the internet: an entertainingly explosive mix indeed, as evidenced by the production blog for forthcoming animated feature Castlevania: Dracula's Curse. Written by the film's screenwriter Warren Ellis and animator James Jean, the blog has fast become a hotbed of fan speculation and disgruntlement at it not garnering fan input. In a post titled 'Fan Input About Music', Ellis lays down the law: '...this is just a production blog. If we decide that all the music will be played by one guy on the spoons – goth spoons – then that's the way it'll be'.

Site:
Castlevania: Dracula's Curse
URL:
www.castlevaniadraculascurse.com

EVENT

Sony's open Home policy

Europe's DevStation event reveals the next six months of technical innovation



Middleware firms such as Emergent, Kynogon and AI.implant were also on hand to talk about getting the most out of PS3, along with SCEE VPs Zeno Colaço (below left) and Paul Holman





Sony's always stressed the future-proof nature of PlayStation 3. At DevStation, the company's European developer conference, it revealed some of those future plans, in terms of techniques in making better games, as well as providing its roadmap for services such as Home and the PlayStation Network.

"The key difference with Home is it allows content creators the decision-making process over the feel of how the experience evolves," stressed **Zeno Colaço**, vice president of publisher and developer relations at Sony Computer Entertainment Europe (SCEE), of the company's new online community space

"Everyone agrees PlayStation 3 is a top-end console, but when you combine its top-end graphics and top-end gameplay with the immersion and user control provided by Home, it becomes a very different proposition. I think that's the beauty of Home. It doesn't come out in a fixed version at a specific date. It's continually evolving. We're currently at the starting point, where it's SCEE and our developer and publishing partners, but further down the line there will be user-generated content, too."

Of course, with the first closed beta just opened and a launch date sometime in autumn, there's still plenty of homework to be done. The London team developing the technology gave a presentation providing a rough schedule of when they expected the service's various features to become available. A new version of what's referred to as the Home Development Kit (HDK), which links into standard development tools such as SN Systems' ProDG, Maya and the Havok physics engine, will be released every month.

The result will be a rich 3D graphics layer with community-based features such as text and voice chat, plus minigames, which sits on top of services provided by the PSN, such as payment and gaming.



Held at the BFI Southbank, the three-day event was attended by over 450 European Sony-licensed developers. Similar events have been held in Japan and America

SCEE is already talking to half a dozen publishing partners which are expected to have their own Home areas when the service goes live. These can be hosted by the companies themselves, a decision at odds with the centralised approach of Microsoft and Nintendo. The areas can also be customised in terms of their look and feel. "Since Home was revealed at GDC, we've been talking to content creators, and they can see we're not dictating what they can do. That's a massive change," said Colaço. "Our philosophy has always been to offer free access to the consumer through the PlayStation world. Now what's really caught their imagination is the direct connection they can have."

Home wasn't the only point of interest at DevStation, however. The three-day event, which was attended by over 450 developers, broke down into specific tracks. The sold-out first day was designed as an introduction to PlayStation 3 development, with talks on making the most of the system's main components.

Day two saw more detailed studies into making the most of PS3's parallel SPU architecture for tasks such as scene processing and vertex shading. Optimising and debugging code was another focus. The final day was split into making the most of the PSN features, such as matchmaking, scoreboards, patching and using the store, as well as audio, physics and AI tools presentations.

What's become clear is the increasingly flexible nature of SCEE's current operations. PlayStation 3, PSP, PSN and now Home are all individual, interlinked parts of the company's future. "Everything has to link all the way along," agreed **Paul Holman**, SCEE's vice president of technology. "It isn't something that generally affects development teams as they tend to work on one thing at a time, but behind the scenes we have to take a very holistic view across every platform so everything hangs together."

And this approach is best seen in the SDK versions for each platform. Just as with Home's monthly drops, these enable developers to use new features which are then exposed to consumers as the firmware for PS3 and PSP is updated. Pricing and firstparty titles might make the headlines in this generation's console war, but it seems it will be month-by-month innovations that will have the greatest effect in the long run.





As well as talks about technology and tools, DevStation was also an opportunity to get hands-on with games, while Criterion gave an early demo of *Burnout Paradise* on PS3







Depsite the promise of upcoming titles such as *Lair* and *LittleBigPlanet*, PS3 sales were overtaken in April by the ageing Game Boy Advance. It was a good month for Nintendo, with the two best-selling games being the latest DS Pokémon titles, *Diamond/Pearl*

Sony commits to justify price

Facing gloomy sales, SCEA's president promises to address content issues



In a month which saw Sony announce a 68 per cent drop in profits from the previous fiscal year, and with the NPD report for April showing a further drop in PS3 sales, SCEA president and CEO **Jack Tretton** had a difficult job in rallying confidence in the gaming division.

Admitting that the price point of the PS3 was a 'challenge' for consumers, Tretton said that a commitment to provide exclusive titles for the machine would "deliver the justification behind the cost of the machine." Tretton went on to specify a figure of 15 exclusive titles and services that would arrive on PS3 over the next year, adding: "The content message will be addressed very nicely."

This focus to strengthen the PS3's software line-up is a reiteration of comments made by senior vice president Takao Yuhara after the release of Sony's annual report, which stated that the significant operating loss was "a result of the sale of PS3 at strategic price points lower than its production cost during the introductory period."

In this light, Nintendo's strategy of never releasing console hardware as a loss leader makes a lot of sense, particularly as the company's US sales figures ran rampant in April, up 20 per cent over the previous month, with the top four spots for videogame software sales occupied by titles for Nintendo consoles.

Continue

FAQs
The best kind of friend: there when you need them

GBA
SP or Micro, a relaxing step back from PSP or DS

Summer
Joypads are put down... and arcades beckon

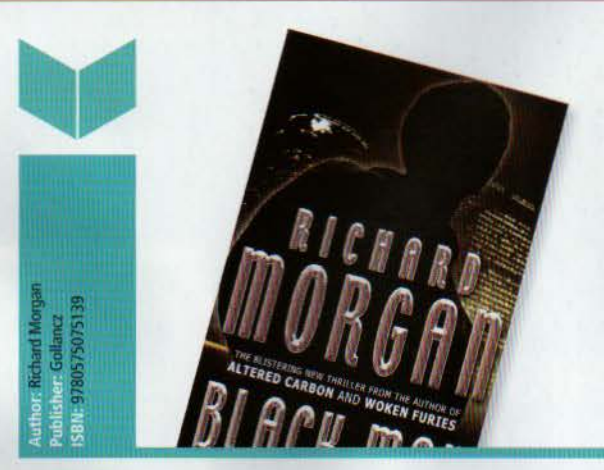
Quit

QTEs
Can *Heavenly Sword* give them new life?

The Wii drought
We're running out of ways to play *Wii Sports* now

Limp PSP ports
It's not just graphics that need revamping, y'know

Author: Richard Morgan
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 9780575075139



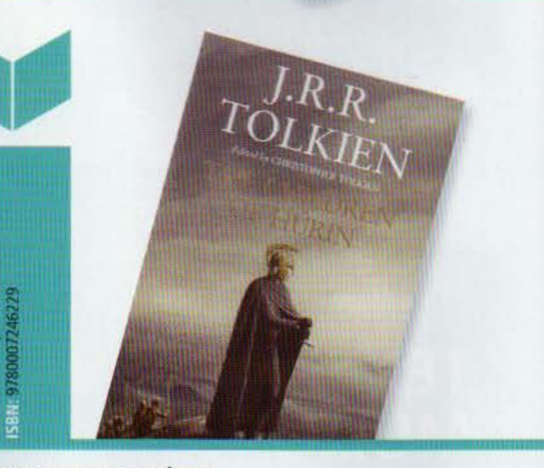
BLACK MAN

It's a case of genetically-modified fire fighting fire in Richard Morgan's latest slab of futuristic black ops

So far, there's been little room for sentiment in the muscular sci-fi world of Richard Morgan. The three books tracing the violent arc of freelance grunt Takeshi Kovacs and the testosterone-fuelled corporation wars detailed in Market Forces have all been pumped full of boys and their destructive toys. Morgan's latest, Black Man, continues the trend but also offers a more finely-grained atmosphere. For not only is new hero Marsalis literally the black man in question, he's a genetically-modified killer who is also a pariah to his own kind. He's cut a deal: paid to take down his brother Variant 13s who have gone rogue and escaped from the restrictions the military complex that created them now places on them.

It's not until one 13 manages to get onboard and crashland a shuttle into the Pacific, triggering a string of seemingly unrelated murders, that Marsalis' independent attitude becomes really useful to what's left of human society, though. Except now he has to operate within the system: bossed around by suits, and partnered with a female ex-cop with a head full of Variant 13 issues of her own. But, in between the bodily harm inflicted on witnesses, prisoners, police executives and obvious bad guys, Marsalis discovers some things more painful than a cracked rib or the impact of a bullet at close range. It hardly makes Black Man touchy-feely, of course, but this is certainly his best since Kovacs' original introduction in Altered Carbon.

Author: J.R.R. Tolkien
Publisher: Harper Collins
ISBN: 9780007246229



THE CHILDREN OF HÚRIN

A nasty tale from the early annals of Middle-earth, this is more Greek tragedy than happy hobbits

Talk about keeping it in the family. After a lifetime as his father's literary executor, Christopher Tolkien, in turn, seems to be passing the baton down to his son Adam in this, the 11th posthumous book based on the work of the fantasy master. You can almost imagine the Tolkiens as a family of bards listed in one of Middle-earth's many genealogies. As for The Children of Húrin itself, it's one of the three key long-form narratives Tolkien wrote, rewrote, but ultimately never finished. Even The Silmarillion, the complete history of Middle-earth up to the time of The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, had to be constructed from a vast amount of detailed and sometimes contradictory notes after JRR died. Still, the Children of Húrin is a surprising choice compared to other two options; the downfall of the hidden Elven kingdom of Gondolin, or the daring and romantic tale of Beren and Lúthien. It is the most self-contained, however, and perhaps its brutal combination of stubborn hearts and malicious fate will act as a shock for those who have tagged Tolkien as a comfortable writer. There's certainly nothing homely about this tale, in which the family of a brave but proud warrior is cast down by the wiles of the original dark lord Morgoth, while their captured father is forced to watch. Indeed, even ignoring the unwitting incest, murders and suicide, there's little but bitterness, alienation and eventual doom. Even Peter Jackson would pass on the option.

INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

Condemned 2: Bloodshot

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** SEGA



Condemned 2's deathmatch play is an unsettling prospect; the first game revolted you with your brutality, this one wants you to celebrate it. Combo multipliers are the other peculiar addition

2 Spicy

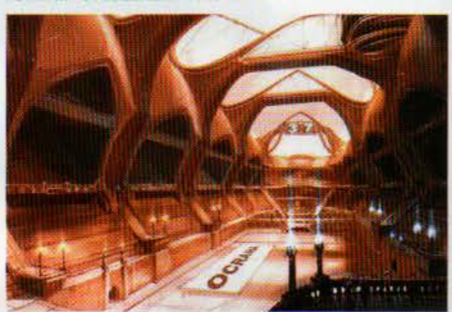
FORMAT: ARCADE **PUBLISHER:** SEGA



Lindbergh gets its first lightgun game, which frankly looks like all of the Capcom Four rolled into one. Versus play means a separate cabinet for each shooter, with foot pedals controlling movement

Speedball 2

FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** FROGSTER



Not quite so brutal and not, it seems, so deluxe, the euro remake of the Bitmap classic at least has Mike Montgomery on board. The absence of crunching metal noises has never been so loud

Guitar Hero Encore: Rocks The 80s

FORMAT: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** ACTIVISION



Another month, another *Guitar Hero* announcement. This time it's the long-rumoured expansion pack, reigniting forgotten flames such as Flock of Seagulls, Twisted Sister, Asia and Bow Wow Wow

Fallout 3

FORMAT: PC, PS2, Wii **PUBLISHER:** PLAYLOGIC



The announcement of a starring role for Liam Neeson is atomic, but will his father character end up looking like one of *Oblivion*'s many potato-heads? Expect that answer and more next month

The Secret World

FORMAT: 360, PC **PUBLISHER:** FUNCOM



Consider the cake had and eaten by an MMO in which everything mythical becomes true. 'Legendary stories, ageless conflicts and powerful cabals' are promised, though Cthulhu versus a sword?

Ghost Squad

FORMAT: Wii **PUBLISHER:** SEGA



The curse of the cursor strikes again, the 'lightgun FPS' making a belated jump from arcade to console. Deathmatch supports up to four players, but should Wii be past this kind of thing by now?

Soul Calibur Legends

FORMAT: Wii **PUBLISHER:** BANDAI NAMCO



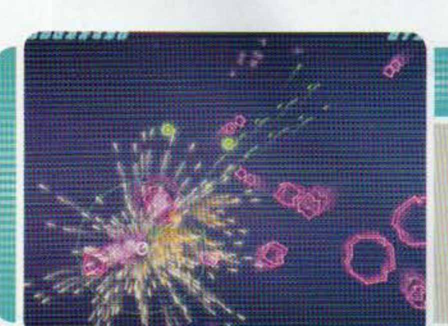
As if the Stage Of History needed a bombastic subtitle. Remote and Nunchuck are the weapons for this thirdperson dungeon crawl, capable of worryingly titled 'orchestrated moves'

Untitled Saints Row Sequel

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** THQ



How delightful it must be to go from *Descent* and *Freespace* to *The Punisher* and yearly instalments of this vacuous gangbang. Still, the original had some neat ideas beneath its ugly exterior



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Echoes

www.binaryzoo.com/games/echoes

Binary Zoo Studios isn't ashamed to note the inspirations behind its new game, *Echoes*. An arena-based shooter with independent movement and firing controls and a trippy neon-vector graphic style, it's just a little like *Geometry Wars*. And it even has Achievement-style awards, called 'Zoots'.

But what it brings into the mix is *Asteroids*. Little asteroids and huge asteroids, all sailing around the screen and producing wonderfully satisfying screen-shaking explosions of glowing shards when you shoot them. And it has meteor storms, rows of rocks that fly across the screen, and asteroid belts, lines of red rocks that accelerate towards your ship. And it has black holes, planets, comets... you get the metaphor.

The result is a wonderfully intense chaos of light that's just a little more forgiving than *Geometry Wars*. Of course, it's all a ruse: you'll still find yourself ending up dead, usually when a snake of those pesky red asteroid belts piles itself into you.

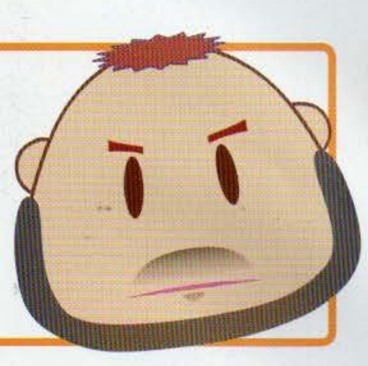
The chance for more of those lovely explosions is enough to have you returning, though.

SOMETHING ABOUT

Japan

Manga, movie... and nothing

Zam! Biff! Pow! Producer Brick Bardo on why films and games don't always mix



I went to see a movie named Bugmaster. It's the latest movie from the creator of Akira, Katsuhiro Otomo: I'm pretty much sure most people reading Edge know either this man's name or have heard of Akira. In a similar way to Akira, Bugmaster is based on a manga, though unlike Akira it is not the work of Otomo, but rather Yuki Urushibara. To be frank, Bugmaster is not a great movie. But writing film criticism is for film mags: what's interesting to us is that Bugmaster as indicative of a wider trend.

Nowadays in Japan, there are numerous movies and TV series based on manga. As well as Bugmaster, there are so many others so often that it's almost impossible to remember them all. I'd be very surprised if anyone could recognise more than a few of the following (some are recent releases, others for the coming months): Dororo, Limit of Love, Nana, Death Note, Honey & Clover, Love Complex, Rough, Sakuran, GeGeGe no Kitaro, Jigyakuro Uta, Arakure Knight, The Wall Man, Hana Yori Dango, Nodame Cantabile, Sexy Voice & Robo. At the moment, Japan is awash with live-action adaptations of manga: I wrote a couple of months ago that the Japanese movie industry has regained control of its domestic market, and this is just one of several possible illustrations. But, interestingly enough, this trend of making films from mangas is not limited to Japan: Hollywood's investment in the nearest equivalent, US comics, is huge. But the superficial similarities hide some key differences.

Mangas are not just about kids or maniacs. In Japan their appeal is far wider. All classes and all ages read manga. No matter who a person is, it would be considered nothing out of the ordinary to see them reading a manga

In Hollywood, minds are focused on superhero stories using highly recognisable characters from Marvel or DC licences. In general, they are all about action. In Japan, on the other hand, the scale is far smaller. The films are mainly about romance, humour or youth, featuring protagonists that become known as their own unique story unfolds. Of course, comics and mangas are quite different in nature, but just how different is not widely appreciated.

Mangas are not just about kids or maniacs. In Japan their appeal is far wider. All classes and all ages, from the mewling schoolboy right the way up to the grown salaryman, read manga. And much like the chicken and the egg, it is impossible to know whether it is because of this reader diversity that there is an incredible variety, or whether the variety is creating the demand. But the one thing that is clear, and is important, is that in Japan, no matter who a person is, it would be considered nothing out of the ordinary to see them reading a manga.

This fanbase has brought about a situation where popular manga are systematically turned into movies. But manga are uniquely suited to this, and often provide a solid visual and narrative foundation for a film. This has the added bonus that most of these movies are focused on trying to stay true to the original work in its spirit and message, which might possibly explain their huge success domestically.

But the great majority of these great stories will



Comics seem like ideal source material for games, but it's hardly surprising if Japanese game makers are uninspired by western efforts

stop there. Among the latest manga movies only a few have found their way toward the gaming world. There are the odd titles, such as *Dororo*, *Nana* or *Death Note*, but *Dororo*, for instance, was made by Sega in 2004 under the title *Blood Will Tell* and has no relation whatsoever with the movie."

With the US titles, almost all of the comics made into movies will find their gaming form as well, however uninspiring the results might be. It is like a formula applied each time: comics to movie to game. The only comparable Japanese model might be going from manga to animation to game. If a manga serial is popular enough to be made into a live-action movie, however, it won't go any further than that.

I experienced the frustration of trying to go beyond the movie format first-hand. In the past, I made several attempts at adapting movie scripts into game scripts, but not one worked in a way that made the interactive element necessary, or seemed anything other than the worst kind of movie adaptation. Since most of these movies were about youth, romances and other abstract elements that are very difficult to communicate within a game, it's understandable that people generally don't think it's possible to make a game inspired by a Japanese manga-based movie. There is also, perhaps surprisingly, a growing disparity between the time needed to make a movie (in Japan, from pre-production to release is very short, and even a big budget sci-fi spectacular will rarely go beyond a year of production) and the time needed to make a game (which is increasing all the time). Perhaps it might be possible on the GBA, or even the DS at a push, but it is impossible to developing something advanced on more powerful and demanding platforms.

So regardless of whether a movie is based on a manga or not, you're unlikely to find a game based on it. This isn't a wholly bad thing: I'd prefer to avoid the easy formula of most western licensed tie-ins when thinking about making a game from a movie. And if it was so easy to do original and different things across all the media all the time, we'd all be at it. But however hard a project might be in theory is almost irrelevant when linked to the even bigger problem: no Japanese publisher would dare risk a game tied in to a Japanese movie!

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

The Legend Of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass



Twilight Princess lasted a week, and that freshly dug up copy of *Wind Waker* won't last much longer, so this next Link fix really can't come soon enough
DS, NINTENDO

Eternal Sonata



In 1949 Chopin lay dying, and apparently dreamed up this RPG universe. Playing as the poet of the piano with musical fighting? This had better see a European release
360, NAMCO BANDAI

Super Smash Bros Brawl



Teasing websites, great screenshots and lists of composers and characters don't make the wait for a headline Wii game any more bearable. And where's Ness?
Wii, NINTENDO

Pre-played

To develop in interesting times



The demo for *Blacksite: Area 51* caused some consternation for being so short, but it functions exactly as a film trailer does, apart from being interactive – appropriately enough for a game

For those who keep an eye on retailer charts, a familiar name spent the middle weeks of May climbing back up to the top spot – *Crackdown*. Or rather, *Crackdown With Halo 3 Beta Access!*, as it now seems to be known. Ever since the plan to integrate the beta was announced, there's been plenty of speculation about how big a lift it would give to *Crackdown*'s sales, and about how Dave Jones and the Real Time Worlds team might feel about watching a game that deserved success in its own right earn it thanks to another. It's certainly not a new trend, as those with untouched copies of *Zone Of The Enders With Playable Metal Gear Solid 2 Demo!* will attest, but it's been a high-profile experiment in just how hungry gamers are for unreleased content.

Indeed, a quick glance down the list of games previewed this month reveals that it's not an experiment any more – it's business as usual. The release date of *Age Of Conan: Hyborian Adventures* may still be some way off, but thousands of players are have already explored its potential in its beta. *Devil May Cry 4* doesn't even have an estimated UK release date as present, but it's certain that its forthcoming downloadable demo will make as a big a splash as last year's equivalent for *Lost Planet*.

But what's also clear is that the purpose of these sneak peeks is changing. Although the *Halo 3* multiplayer levels made available are ostensibly a beta test, it's clear that it's more a marketing manoeuvre, since Bungie's legendarily thorough and long-running internal tests have already put the game through its paces. And where demos used to be about trying before you buy, a new breed, typified by the *Blacksite: Area 51* 'teaser demo', are designed not to answer your questions about a game but to pique your curiosity. And *Crackdown* may be finding itself in a unique position. Gamers who decided against buying it, having sated themselves on its famously generous demo, may now have changed their minds in order to get their hands on another demo.

But while the merits and dangers of demos will be debated for years to come, there's no doubt they take attention away from the games that are finished – as the makers of *Shadowrun* are all too painfully aware.

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR**
DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTAR NORTH**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER 16**

Grand Theft Auto IV

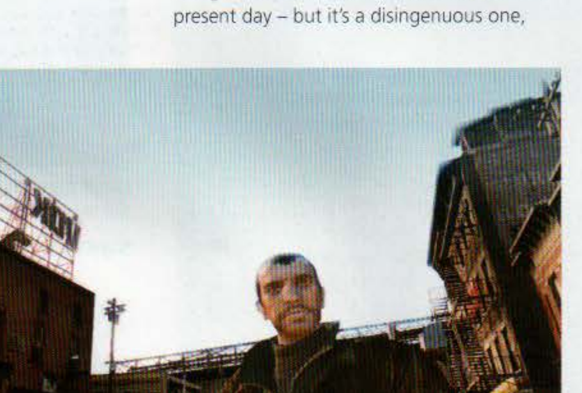
GTA comes down to Earth, but has the series lost its spark, or found its soul?

Where is it? That's the easy part. When the trailer for *Grand Theft Auto IV* was released back in March, confused argument briefly flared around the game's location – was it *GTAIII*'s Liberty City or real-world New York? The answer, of course, is that it's both, a fictional cloak of convenience for a town that in detail and spirit already looks far closer to the Big Apple than any more nominally accurate videogame rendering has managed in the past.

The second question, an obsession for *GTA* fans ever since *Vice City* took them back to the cold glamour of 1980s late-night TV, is somewhat trickier: when is it? It has a straightforward answer – *GTAIV* is set in the present day – but it's a disingenuous one, because this Liberty isn't present-day New York. Giuliani never got elected here, the crime crackdown and economic boom never happened; maybe its World Trade Center equivalent was destroyed, or maybe it was never built.

It's a scruffy, oppressive and dangerous town, and it has a late-20th-century timelessness about it. During a brief but very impressive demo that takes us on a stroll and cruise around Brooklyn (sorry, Broker), our placeholder pop-cultural compass – the car radio – evokes vintage psychedelia and soul as well as brash '90s Eurotrash pop. For a moment, the litter-strewn streets are made to look like something from a 1970s blaxploitation flick. But the truth is, such media pointers no longer have the relevance they once did. *GTAIV* isn't a snapshot of an era any more, or a medley of movie references. Its inspiration and raison d'être are no more nor less than the city itself.

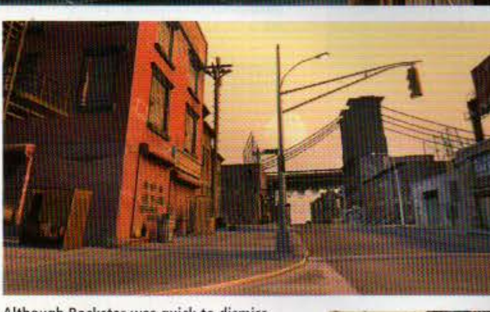
Giuliani never got elected here, the crime crackdown and economic boom never happened; maybe its World Trade Center was destroyed, or maybe it was never built



A playground of similar scope to San Andreas, Liberty City will be much more densely packed, and with more of a vertical dimension (beyond the helicopters you'll be able to use). Climbing a telegraph pole may be a rather blunt way of demonstrating it, but adding that kind of elevation could be key in turning it from a pop-up street map into a real town. Just as key as the astonishingly convincing street life – the crawling, honking traffic, the dulled boom of passing car stereos, the pedestrians who mill, smoke, chat on the phone, and react in panic to a gun being pulled. This being *GTA*, detail isn't just about appearance or even interactivity, it's about behaviour.

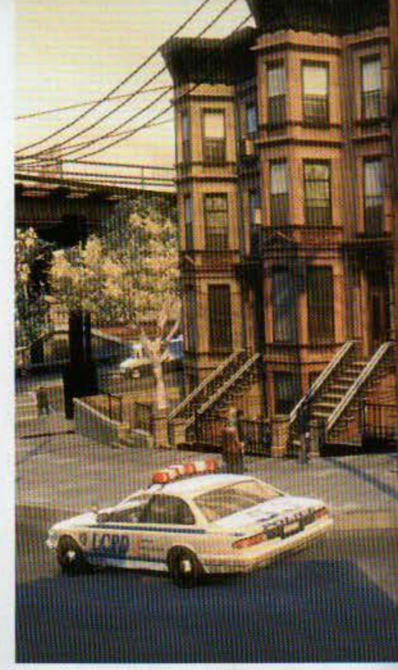
And if one detail of *GTA IV* is telling, it comes during the series' signature activity – stealing a car. Approaching a parked vehicle, eastern European hardman Niko Bellic doesn't just yank the door open, jump in and drive off – he smashes the window to gain access, and has to hotwire it to start the engine. It may be a mere animation flourish, but it speaks volumes. A world that looks real also needs to feel real, and *GTA*'s cartoonish excess – and, perhaps, some of its freewheeling spontaneity – has had to be reeled in.

The visual treatment is grittier, more sober, more adult, and there's every indication that the action and story will follow suit – although Rockstar is keen to stress that the series' sense of humour has not been lost. Niko's journey won't take him to Tony Montana highs of wealth and influence; this, we're told, will be a game of survival rather than supremacy, where he'll climb the criminal ranks but only so far, and his past as a human trafficker will eventually catch up with him. It's still fundamentally going to follow an American Dream





Although Rockstar was quick to dismiss rumours that *GTA* would turn MMO, online multiplayer will form an important part of the game. The 360's DLC is said to be substantial, but a PS3 equivalent has yet to be confirmed





As with previous *GTAs*, you can't expect *IV* to compete with the most graphically advanced games – but it isn't anything like as far behind as before, with stunning lighting. Pull the camera back, and the draw distance and level of activity turn the game into a heart-stopping sight





Rockstar is aiming for a huge improvement to the tactility and responsiveness of manipulating Niko on foot, and the superb animation bears this out, down to the way his head rolls with his swaggering walk. Gunplay is also receiving an overhaul



One thing Rockstar is especially proud of is that the game is 100 per cent seamless and load-free. Even the remarkably detailed, authentically unstylish interiors don't give the new engine a moment's pause





The sheer, towering scale of what we assume will be called the Broker Bridge is worth looking at from this bird's-eye view, but when viewed from street level becomes a real eye-opener. Although our demo didn't include a visit to the Manhattan/Algonquin area, it's easy to imagine players craning the right stick back as often as a New York tourist cranes his neck to drink in the architecture all around him

archetype, but it will be the story of the immigrant's struggle to find a place, rather than the lurid fantasy of the poor man turned king of the world. Indeed, the empty promise with which Niko is lured to Liberty – cousin Roman's tales of a high life of two women, four hot tubs and 15 cars – almost sounds like a parody of the story arcs of *GTA*s past.

This *GTA* is starting to sound like a surprisingly human creation, and Rockstar confirms this with an assertion that managing relationships with people will form a much more significant part of this game, and will be vital to progress. It's not known if the mobile phone featured prominently in the demo will play a part in this, but it seems likely. The importance of a sense of family, loyalty and community to Niko is stressed, something that Rockstar North began to develop in *San Andreas*, and that marks another step away from the lone loose cannon model the series has thrived on.

Niko's body shape may not change – Rockstar is retreating from *San Andreas'* roleplaying peccadillos, fearing they might detract from the crafted strength of Niko's character – but this, we're promised, will be a world where your actions have consequences, a world that bites back. And that is what is at once the most thrilling and the most worrying thing about *GTAIV*. If narrative credibility rules out absurdities like the jetpack, and interactive credibility curtails players' sociopathic rampages, then could the sheer, lunatic freedom that made *GTA* the defining videogame series of the last generation be under threat?

It could. *GTAIV* is, from one perspective, in danger of taking itself too seriously. But the corollary is the outrageously exciting prospect of anyone taking the construction of a videogame world this seriously at all, let alone a developer as gifted and influential as Rockstar North. Even just breathing in the scant PR fumes Rockstar is allowing to escape at present – a hint here, a suggestion there – is intoxicating. The subtle, humane ambition of the plot only adds to the bold, superhuman ambition of creating a virtual city this lifelike, with this much scope for complexity. Even if the unthinkable happens and the game itself falls short, the signs are that the new Liberty City will be an unforgettable creation, and a worthy tribute to the spectacle, diversity and dynamism of its inspiration.



Keys to the city

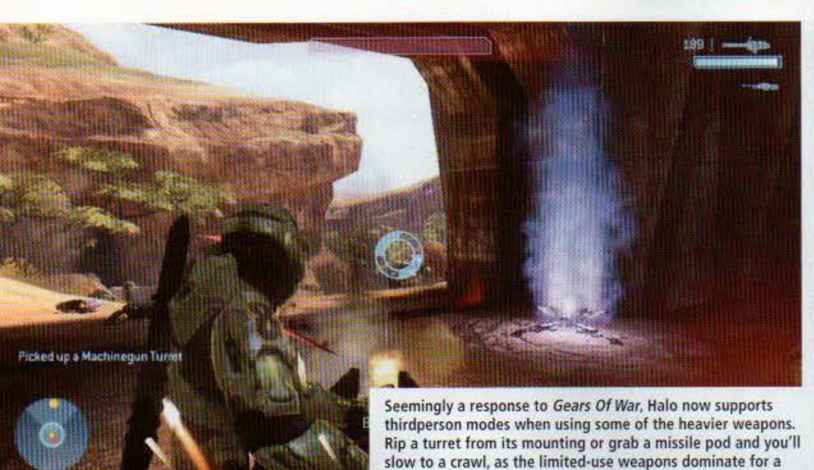
The shape *GTAIV* will take structurally isn't yet clear. It hasn't even been decided yet whether all four boroughs – Algonquin (Manhattan), Broker (Brooklyn), Dukes (Queens) and Bohan (the Bronx), joined by Alderney standing in for part of New Jersey – will be accessible from the start, or progressively unlocked. But Rockstar indicates it has enough faith in its formula to keep things fairly familiar, with the main change being blurring the line between on- and off-mission activities, and to develop the off-mission side of the game considerably. You won't, however, be becoming a property baron in *GTAIV*, this being considered out of step with the new low-key tone.



FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **BUNGIE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER 25**

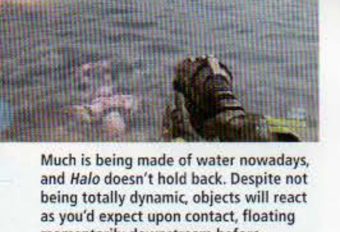
Halo 3

The game every 360 owner wanted to play finally arrives – for beta or for worse



Seemingly a response to *Gears Of War*, Halo now supports thirdperson modes when using some of the heavier weapons. Rip a turret from its mounting or grab a missile pod and you'll slow to a crawl, as the limited-use weapons dominate for a short time while showing off the new character models





Much is being made of water nowadays, and *Halo* doesn't hold back. Despite not being totally dynamic, objects will react as you'd expect upon contact, floating momentarily downstream before finally coming to rest on the riverbed

'Love, Bungie' reads the message on the screen as your first look at *Halo 3* loads. It can never be argued that Bungie hasn't been good to its fans. If anything, the success of *Halo 2*'s multiplayer is testament to the care the studio takes of its audience. With the public multiplayer beta of *Halo 3*, Bungie has once again given something back: more than a demo, it's a chance for fans to take part in the development process, a big thank you for the success of the series.

But the gifts don't end there, as jumping in for the first time you're immediately reminded of how Bungie operates, of how incredibly user-friendly everything is. *Halo 2*'s matchmaking system should have revolutionised the way online gaming is handled on consoles, yet for some reason has yet to be matched. *Halo 3* promises to do just that.

Visually, *Halo 3* has a lot to prove, with the success of Epic's *Gears Of War* raising the expectations and Bungie itself stoking the fires each week in studio updates via its website. *Halo 3* doesn't disappoint. The rich, colourful environments debuted in the multiplayer beta have a bright clarity, creating an unusually consistent game-world in which everything looks like it belongs.

Dropped from *Halo 2* due to a general lack of purpose in a world occupied by Ghosts, the Mongoose returns. With larger levels throughout and considerably faster vehicle respawn times, these zippy little ATVs will get you from A to B in no time, but leave you vulnerable to fire

> The rich, colourful environments debuted in the multiplayer beta have a bright clarity, creating an unusually consistent game-world in which everything looks like it belongs

Realism has never been a goal that *Halo* has chased, but that's never prevented the series from creating vibrant, believable worlds and that stands true a third time around. The HDR lighting which floods every map as you tear around them on bright sunny days may be the first thing you notice over *Halo 2*, but it's *Halo 3*'s use of environmental detail (greenery, water, snow) and, most importantly, scale, that makes a lasting impression.

The three maps on offer have been cleverly chosen specifically to demonstrate the most popular *Halo* game-types: Highground, a dusty run-down military compound similar in structure both visually and tactically to *Halo 2*'s Zanzibar, for team-based games; Valhalla, a huge grassy canyon reminiscent of *Halo*'s Blood Gulch and playing a similar role in objective-based play; and finally Snowbound, a smaller, bowl-like ice map for one-on-one deathmatches. All three are considerably larger than anything seen in the previous games, causing players to rely heavily on Bungie's new additions to gameplay with regards to long-distance travelling, namely the Mongoose ATV, rescued from the cutting-room floor of *Halo 2*, and the highly entertaining Man Cannon (something like *Unreal Tournament*'s jump pad). While each offers a serious tactical advantage, both have clearly been tuned for





After the excessive lock-on of the rocket launcher in *Halo 2*, many were dubious about the introduction of another power weapon, the Spartan laser, in *Halo 3*. Able to take out several vehicles with a single shot, it's more than powerful enough, but its slow charge time and aiming difficulty require skill from the user to be most effective



Ma-sheen-eh-ma

When you've a community as strong as *Halo's*, it can never hurt to throw users a little web 2.0. So, as a new feature for *Halo 3*, Bungie has given players the ability to save films or particularly memorable battles and share them with friends at the touch of a button. Although unavailable in the beta, the final version will allow users to lightly edit the footage, cutting out any excess, but also hand over extensive camera and play controls direct to the user. Entire parties will be able to watch a video together direct from the lobby, each with their own controls, for extensive game analysis.





fun, spicing matches with dashes of slapstick and daredevilry.

But when compared to the previous games, *Halo 3* is little odd. It would be difficult to pick any real standout advances here on the surface, similar in scale to, say, the addition of dual wielding in *Halo 2*, yet subtle refinements in the series' multiplayer offerings abound. Listening to criticisms of fans and combined with lessons learned from releasing *Halo 2* under pressure (and in near-immediate need of a serious update) has proven worthwhile. Some hated *Halo 2* for its reliance on dual wielding. Others loved it for that very reason. Some will only ever touch *Halo*, offended by the sequel and its changes, while others swear the sequel was where the series began. It's clear Bungie has taken all of this on board, balancing every single aspect of the game from weapon rates of fire to map design, and enforcing an enjoyable game the 500th time you boot up. It's paid off, too, as despite the wide range of weapons not one feels as though it entirely supplants the rest. Never in *Halo 3* will you feel as though you're ill equipped for the task at hand, or that you can't eliminate your opponent with the weapon already equipped.

On the subject of equipment, arguably Bungie's big twist this time around is the addition of tactical deployables mapped to the X button. Similar in frequency of use to the Overshield or Active Camo, these one-shot power-ups offer a last-chance escape in overbearing situations. The Bubble Shield puts up an energy wall through which bullets won't pass. The Power Drainer removes the shields of all in the vicinity as well as disabling vehicles, the Grav Lift is a portable jump pad for a speedy exit, and the Tripmine enables stealthy vehicular destruction.

Slotting into the flow and feel of *Halo* immediately, and with weapon balancing as close to perfect as this, your deployable kit can mean the difference between winning and losing. It adds yet more choice to a game that fundamentally relies on decision making rather then execution – the opportunity, not the outcome – for its thrills and spills. With a September release approaching fast, it's clear Bungie is feeling confident. It's already learned all it needed to for *Halo*, and is now concentrating on incorporating absolutely everything it can to enable it to excel. Three games in, and *Halo* is still as much a labour of love today as it was when the series launched, and that care and dedication is reflected back from its fans. Love, Bungie indeed.



With every new generation usually comes a new leap forward visually, yet *Halo 3* is a friendly familiar without being tiresome. The architecture conjures up flashes of *Halo*, while the overall feel is much more that of *Halo 2*

FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **EIDOS**
DEVELOPER: **FUNCOM**
ORIGIN: **NORWAY**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER**

Age Of Conan: Hyborian Adventures

Crush your enemies, see them driven before you, and hear the lamentation of their guild



Monsters are taken from the Conan books, which feature a cast of demons instead of the familiar orcs and trolls. The bestiary also has more common foes, including, according to product manager Erling Ellingsen, "A lot of snakes. Bad ones"







The low fantasy world of Robert E Howard's Conan might not be everyone's choice for the setting of an MMO for 'casual players', but that's exactly what Funcom is aiming for with its follow-up to the successful *Anarchy Online*.

True to the series' amoral and brutal ethos, *Age Of Conan*'s Hyboria certainly lacks the popular colourful high fantasy aesthetic of worlds like Azeroth. The emphasis here is on gritty, with dismembered corpses littering various areas and semi-clad prostitutes hailing your character as it walks through the cities.

In fact, the grittiness goes right down to the character creation toolkit. Though it works in a way very similar to *Oblivion*'s, it triumphs at producing fabulously ugly characters, replete with scars and tattoos for added effect. It's easy to imagine, however, growing happily attached to the gaunt-cheeked, bug-eyed freak that we managed to conjure up in our session.

Funcom is instead tailoring *Age Of Conan* to offer what it hopes will be a more accessible MMO experience. That said, some of the inventive ideas to achieve this that Funcom has described at earlier presentations of the game have been watered down since the beta test.

New players were originally going to have to play through many levels before entering the multiplayer world in an attempt to make sure that everyone would be thoroughly experienced by the time they could mix. Now, the early game – instanced so the player does not encounter other players – is a matter of a few hours between the player character being shipwrecked and washed up on a beach on the small island of Tortage, doing a few quests before making their way into Tortage city and the wider world.

Still in place, however, is the decision to delay choice of character class until level 20, so players can base it on proper experience. Conversations with non-player characters also drop *WOW*-style text boxes in favour o singleplayer-friendly cinematically framed shots of the speakers.

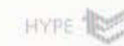
Age Of Conan's big 'casual' draw is its active fighting system, inspired, we're told, by the likes of *Ninja Gaiden*, *God Of War* ar *Dynasty Warriors*. In a move away from the D&D-esque turn-based systems of most MMOs, attacks are initiated in realtime, wit players having to orient their character properly to be able to hit their target.

The emphasis here is on gritty, with dismembered corpses littering various areas and semi-clad prostitutes hailing your character as it walks through the cities

Characters open with three possible directional strikes: from the left, the right ar above. As they gain levels another two directions will become available. Strikes are made by either clicking on a special 'comba rose' representing the directions set at the bottom of the screen, or on the keyboard. Equivalents to *WOW*'s abilities are combos special attacks initiated by hitting sequence of timed strikes. Characters are also equipped with dodge moves, achieved through double taps on directional keys.

Further depth to the system is afforded by being able to assign different weighting to armour to defend certain parts of the body better. Enemies will be differentially

Combat will encompass bows and other weapons that will also utilise the directional strike system, though only melee weapons have so far been demonstrated. Armour and clothing is wonderfully detailed









Enemies will also use magic against you, as demonstrated by this Pict mage. Despite the chaos, battle strategy is all about targeting the most dangerous enemies first



Barbarian battling

A big feature of *Age Of Conan* will be its three tiers of PVP combat. At the lowest level will be drunken brawling, in taverns, for which levels are disregarded and attacks are based on how much characters have drunk. Drinks will have certain effects, and there will be no penalty for losing. The second will be more traditional arena combat, and top-level PVP will be non-instanced siege warfare. Player guilds will be able to build fortified cities – although the locations will be limited to encourage conflict – and non-player factions will also set up cities and attack guild ones. The battles will involve siege weaponry such as catapults and techniques such as formation horse riding, with different formations conferring defensive and attacking attributes.

armoured, too, with their appearance revealing weaknesses: absence of a helmet will suggest susceptibility to over-the-head strikes, for example.

To new players, the system feels somewhat cumbersome. Despite its active nature, all moves are still subject to animation cycles and cooldowns, rendering most fights we had strike-for-strike exchanges until one combatant fell. Many fights also seem rather chaotic, especially, as we found, when parties are entirely melee fighters. And how the system will cope with lag remains to be seen. However, things are likely to smoothen out with balancing (system designer Jason Allen Stone acknowledges that there's much more to be done here), and greater player experience and character abilities, though this rather contradicts the game's touted accessibility.

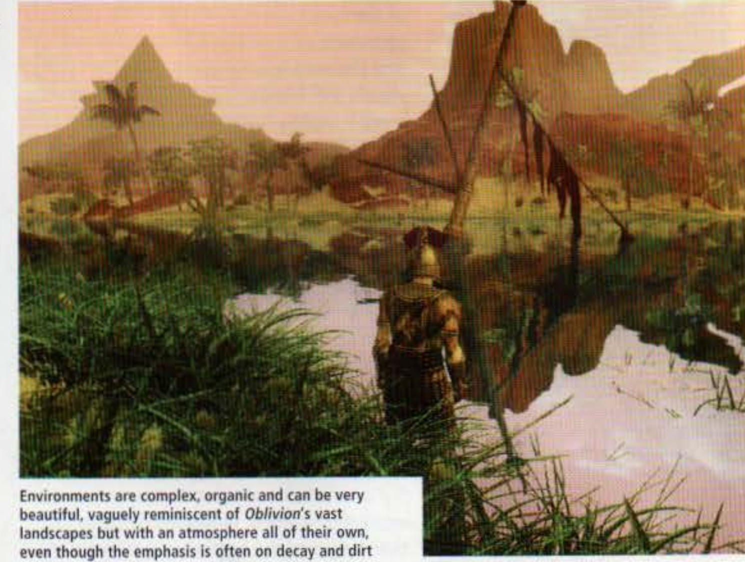
From what little we've seen of Hyboria, it's already highly detailed, featuring towering mountains and complex cities. The huge Pict Aztec-style pyramid on which much of our playtest was based was breathtaking in scope – Funcom intends for much of it to be able to be explored. Other locations span the usual deserts, jungles and icy wastes.

Hyboria promises to be rather more dynamic than most MMO worlds, with non-player characters assigned AI schedules similar to those found in *Oblivion*. We witnessed a caravan being attacked by monsters: helping defend friendly characters in such unscripted encounters may also lead to rewards. Such dynamics will also extend to behaviours such as AI enemies setting up camps outside and attacking player cities (see 'Barbarian battling').

At the moment, *Age Of Conan*'s innovations are causing it to fall uncomfortably between the twitch-thrills of singleplayer games and the methodological strategising of more traditional MMOs. Whether it can hone them enough in the few months until release remains to be seen, but it's hard not to feel that the divergence from both of these bases is currently threatening the accessibility that Funcom is aiming for.



Combos are initiated by hitting a shaded directional strike and then a timed sequence of further strikes. Until committed to memory, much squinting at the combat rose is necessary



Environments are complex, organic and can be very beautiful, vaguely reminiscent of *Oblivion*'s vast landscapes but with an atmosphere all of their own, even though the emphasis is often on decay and dirt



Manhunt 2's look is still oppressive and texturally very believable. Rockstar's artists may work wonders with seedy dilapidation in brothels and houses, but the abandoned factory in the flashback level is sadly conventional



Despite some training-level overtones, the opening asylum setting is has a tremendously forbidding atmosphere thanks to some excellent, nerve-shredding sound design

FORMAT: **PS2, PSP, WII**
PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (LONDON, TORONTO)**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **JULY 7**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E176**

Manhunt 2

Rockstar's videogame nasty finds an unlikely home on Wii

There's currently a lot of disquiet in the Wii community about the preponderance of 'PS2 ports' among thirdparty output for the system. Their frequently creaky cross-platform visuals and ill-fitting controls justify that disquiet. But it's also true that an eventual solution to the problem of bringing traditional games to the Wii is just as important to its long-term future as bespoke experimentation; and that one of its very best games – one of Nintendo's flagships – is a subtle port of a last-gen title that knows just when the Remote can add something, and when it gets in the way. *Twilight Princess* is that game, and the Wii version of *Manhunt 2* has learned a lot from it.

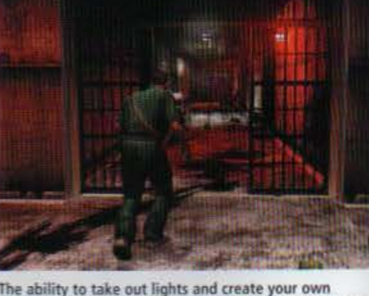
After playing the Toronto studio's conversion it's clear that it will be the pick of the bunch, and not just because of its persistent, progressive-scan blood-spatter and the extra level of grimy conviction to its visuals. Wii *Manhunt 2*'s elaborated controls make it slightly harder and considerably more viscerally involving than its PS2 sibling.

Melee blows are dealt with jabs of the Nunchuck and the Remote, one for each fist or foot, and you can guard yourself by raising both: beating down a floored opponent with heavy swipes of the Remote has a grim finality. You lean round corners with a tilt of the Nunchuck, and aim a gun by pointing it at the screen (shakily – its high sensitivity is appropriate to *Manhunt*'s extreme tension).

The most significant difference is in the stealth kills. These gruesome interludes are executed with a single button-press on PS2, but on the Wii that's just the beginning of a sequence of timed, prompted gestures with both halves of the controller that mimic the onscreen brutality – jabbing the Remote to stab, jerking both upward to strangle, etc. These become particularly involved with the new environmental kills, and intensify the bloody pay-offs by adding the risk of failure.

Like *Zelda*, *Manhunt 2* uses motion-sensing for extra dynamic range, involving the Remote at key moments and letting it melt away to no more than a couple of buttons during downtime. The perfect expression of its savage, imaginative economy is when trying to avoid detection by a guard peering into shadow; in place of the PS2's quick-fire button-prompts, you simply have to hold perfectly still.

We played two new levels of the PS2 version straight after the Wii demo, one of which was a flashback, featuring the game's second lead character, Leo, suggesting a more sophisticated plot structure for this sequel. While still a model of pacing and design, they had a considerably lesser impact without the Wii controls, and we were reminded of our concerns that this might be a much less sinister, more conventionally and gratuitously gross splatterhouse than the first game. With the Wii Remote in your hands, though, your heart will be racing too fast to care.

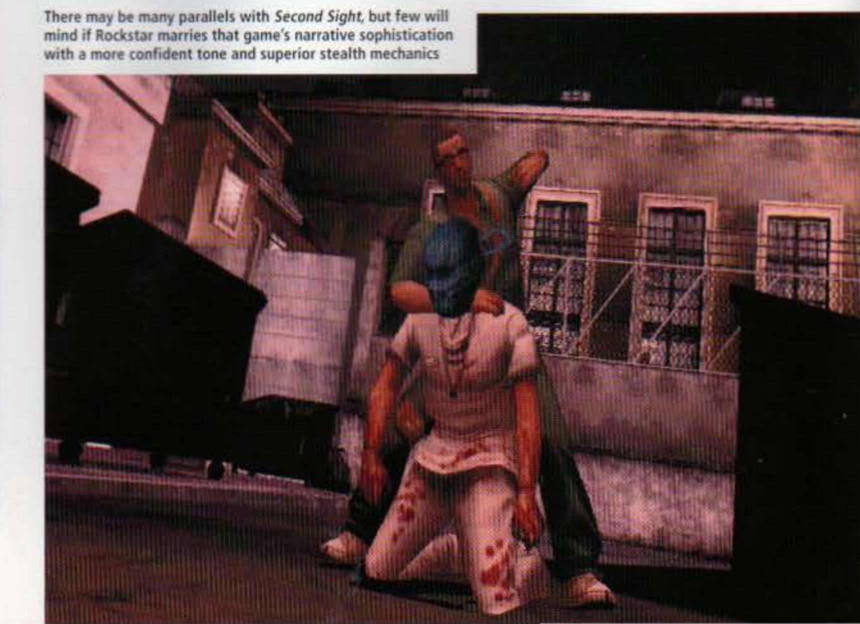


The ability to take out lights and create your own shadow does add flexibility to the game, but the guard's unscripted, unpredictable search routines – and new-found suspicion of shadow – open new possibilities



Third sight

As well as demonstrating the Wii version, Rockstar let a few more plot details slip on this visit, confirming that it is completely unconnected with the first *Manhunt*. Main character Dr Daniel Lamb was involved in a shadowy research project; when funding was threatened he agreed to participate in an 'ultimate test of effectiveness' for the project (of unspecified nature, but one cutscene refers to a 'trigger' in his brain). Years later, he wakes up with amnesia in the middle of a patient breakout from a mental facility, having just killed a doctor with his bare hands. His missing memories will come back to him in the form of playable flashback levels – some starring his still-mysterious cohort, Leo – strongly reminiscent of Free Radical's 2004 stealth thriller *Second Sight*.



There may be many parallels with *Second Sight*, but few will mind if Rockstar marries that game's narrative sophistication with a more confident tone and superior stealth mechanics





After the lush desolation of *Lost Planet*, it's a shame that *DMC4*'s mountain environments (below) are so thoroughly underwhelming. Hopefully the next few months can be spent bringing them up to the standards of the city streets, which are distractingly beautiful



Devil May Cry 4

As Nero takes over from Dante, can Capcom's standard bearer make a new name for itself?

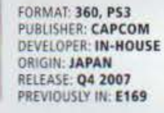
There are some games which matter because of their stories, or their engines, or their gameplay innovations. But there are others whose place in the headlines is determined by entirely external factors. *Devil May Cry 4* has fallen into that second category twice now, no small feat for a game that still has another six months' development to go.

The first time it hit the headlines was at last year's TGS, when it was viewed as a crucial benchmark for PS3's graphical grunt, winning praise for its dramatic HDR lighting and densely detailed environments. That impression still holds: city streets are almost exhaustingly elaborate, every railing thick with curlicues, every wall a patchwork of mosaic textures. Interiors are just as ambitious, and demonstrate that the secret to making environments seem more real isn't necessarily to do better but rather to do *more*. *Resistance*, that other PS3 standard bearer, staged its rooms with high-detail models of tables and cabinets, but the result was sparse and sterile. *DMC4* seems less concerned with the quality of each object, and more with giving the impression that these places have actually been inhabited – store rooms are full of clutter, corners of rooms stacked up with furniture and crates. It may sound unspectacular, but the result is a far richer-feeling world, and a gratifying place in which to have a freewheeling fist-fight.

But, of course, *DMC4*'s position as PS3 poster-boy is the other reason it hit the headlines. Now confirmed as a multi-platform title, it raised eyebrows as yet another traditional banker for Sony jumped into bed with the competition. How significant the loss of these exclusives will prove remains to be seen, but there's no question that *DMC4*'s baroque chaos is going to be a draw on both consoles. The new grab move, which allows Nero to grapple across rooms, pilfer orbs from behind locked gratings, and smash enemies to the floor, is pure videogame satisfaction, and greatly aids the fluidity of combo creation. It may also substantially undermine the difficulty, but *Devil May Cry* has always been as much about spectacle as strategy, and it may well prove that the interplay between Nero's fist, sword and gun moves is closer to that holy grail of easy to pick up, difficult to master – finally letting *DMC4* hit the headlines in its own right.



The grab move only works as a grapple from specifically marked points in the environment, but can be freely employed in fights, ensuring your opponents don't get so spread out as to bring your combo to a stuttering stop



FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **Q4 2007**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E169**



Picture perfect

Since *Devil May Cry*'s environments are grander and more lavish than ever before, and since Nero's demon arm gives him even greater freedom of movement than ever before, *DMC4*'s camera system faces a tough challenge. Still only granting (or burdening, depending on your perspective) its players with minimal control, it seems to be developing into a robust system, coping well with Nero's propensity for leaping three storeys in the air, and doing an effective job of signposting your still largely linear route through the complex levels.



Revving your sword – by repeatedly tugging on one of the shoulder buttons – charges it up. Once full, its next strike will unleash a devastating special attack. It's a nice gimmick, but a full charge takes too long to build up, and encourages you to hang back from fights until it's ready



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **VIVENDI**
DEVELOPER: **BLIZZARD**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **TBA**

Starcraft 2

Blizzard thrills Korea with an RTS sequel built for its specialist market


Blizzard president Mike Morheime stated that only now are average PCs capable of displaying the swarms of Zerg required to make a convincing 3D update to *StarCraft*. With up to 300 on screen at once, you can see his point



Carry on Kerrigan

The focus on *StarCraft 2*'s competitive play hasn't distracted speculation on the game's singleplayer campaigns. *StarCraft 2* takes place four years after the events of *Brood War*, with human/Zerg hybrid Kerrigan at large, rumours of a forerunner race and their genetic experiments on the Protoss and Zerg still a concern, and the US Confederacy-inspired Terran army still displaying murderous tendencies. It's clear that Blizzard's rendering farms have been working on overtime – the announcement was accompanied by a gorgeous FMV teaser trailer.

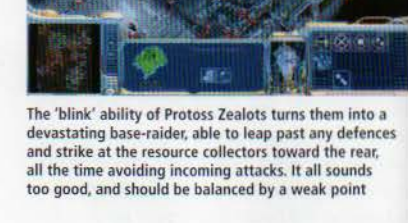


It's all about the micro. Micro-management. Or, as Blizzard game design head **Rob Pardo** puts it at a Korea-focused announcement event, "differentiation by player skill". It was a collage of factors that led to Korea's famed adoption of *StarCraft* as a major sport. You can point to the economic depression of the mid-'90s, coupled with an already wired society (broadband was widely available in PC gaming rooms or Baangs) that required cheap electronic entertainment. But you can also point to the almost endless depth of *StarCraft* – no matter how good you are, there was always someone who could micro-manage large-scale skirmishes just that little bit better. Korean cyberathletes train for 13 hours a day, non-stop, until they're able to regularly make over five clicks per second, spitting out decisions at a furious rate. And recently they were out in force for a two-day invitational *StarCraft* tournament and celebration at Seoul's Olympic Park – 10,000 smiling faces welcoming their heroes.



They all face a new challenge. *StarCraft 2* is a traditional RTS, on the surface no great leap from the original game. But it's being built for the micro. It's not relying on technical leaps, or banner features like *Supreme Commander*'s grand zoom or *Company Of Heroes*' devastating physics engine to appeal. Just management-heavy combat with a small cluster of new units.

Take the Protoss Stalker's new 'blink' ability. For casual players, it's a quick way to warp across ridges or over impassable terrain. In the hands of *StarCraft* master, it's a way to outplay and out-micro an opponent. Rather than blinking a group of ten or more, each unit can be teleported independently, rapidly appearing and disappearing in a tight circle. It allows players to keep their units just out of touching distance from melee enemies. It's devastating against the insect-like Zerglings – they never have a chance to shred the Stalker's tin-foil skin with their close-combat talons; every time they get close to a target it simply disappears and reappears. Almost all the units shown seem to have similar properties: from the floating Warp Ray that hugely increases its damage done the longer it targets an enemy, to the Phase Prism, a mobile energy platform that can summon an entire army from nothing, anywhere on the map.


The 'blink' ability of Protoss Zealots turns them into a devastating base-raider, able to leap past any defences and strike at the resource collectors toward the rear, all the time avoiding incoming attacks. It all sounds too good, and should be balanced by a weak point

This is a Korea-focused game. Blizzard make no bones about that. Pardo lays down its philosophy. "We're going to produce the number one realtime strategy for competitive play," he says, and "we'll only release it when it's ready." The Baangs are already preparing for a new Zerg rush.


The most controversial additions to *StarCraft* are the super-units. Each side is to be given a single weapon that can cause massive damage – in the Protoss' case it's the 'Planet Cracker' with its huge underslung laser







Battling in recognisably western locales like Paris might prove to be rather unnerving; though we're familiar with games set in the European cities of the 1940s, modern warfare games tend to take place comfortably further from home

It's not yet known how the three different factions will be balanced in terms of units. While you'd think that the Americans' space-based army might give them a bit of an advantage, such an imbalance is something that is rarely workable in an RTS game

Tom Clancy's EndWar

Squad tactics are exchanged for global military strategy in new Clancy franchise

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT SHANGHAI**
ORIGIN: **CHINA**
RELEASE: **2008**

Tom Clancy has always been a good measure of the public's perception of global politics – or rather, their fear of it. In *EndWar*, with which the Clancy brand makes a new move into the RTS genre, an overtly aggressive Russia destabilises the world by seizing Ukrainian oil fields. The US response is to launch the euphemistically named Freedom Star, a satellite base housing regiments of marines who can deploy to any location on Earth within a matter of hours.

As a result of all this, three power blocks vie for dominance over the world's resources in an apocalyptic battle: Russia, the US and Europe. Perhaps the conspicuous absence of the Chinese has something to do with the tricky politics of developing the game at Ubisoft's Shanghai studio. Nonetheless, it's a plot that astutely preys upon all kinds of contemporary political tension: unilateral US military action, the possession of dwindling oil resources and the return in the public perception of the Russians as the world's Bad Guys – no doubt aided by anxiety over immigration from the Eastern Bloc, and the heavy media coverage given to the recent apparent assassination of Russian dissident Alexander Litvinenko.

It's not quite clear if the events of *EndWar* occur within the same universe as existing Clancy franchises – but early screenshots and concept art detailing armour and armaments follow a very similar aesthetic to *Ghost Recon*. In other ways, however, *EndWar* is obviously a massive departure, not least because it is an RTS. Although little is known about the gameplay, the fact that it is to be developed exclusively for consoles suggests a streamlining of typical RTS mechanics. One confirmed feature that backs this up is the ability to control units via voice command, though it remains to be seen if the game over-relies on this to its detriment. While voice recognition has been a long-time ambition of *EndWar*'s lead developer Michael de Plater, whose considerable RTS heritage includes several flavours of *Total War*, its implementation in other Clancy games has been very uneven.

More details on the game are due soon, hopefully offering additional information on the game's multiplayer component, which promises to be a semi-persistent battle between the three power blocks in a manner not dissimilar to *Planetside*.

Although its release is way off, early signs are promising: there's no doubting the pedigree of the team, and its exclusivity for consoles is a move which could mitigate the usual problems that such strategy games have had in being adapted from PC. *EndWar* could prove another step in bringing in the console RTS from the cold.





The tactical map looks to be even more detailed than those of the *Ghost Recon* games; innovatively in a squad shooter, it only adds clarity to the RTS, typically already offering a top-down perspective of the battlefield



These first few glimpses of the Risk-like world map suggest some regions of the world don't come into play – the Middle East and Asia apparently keep their heads down and stay out of trouble during World War III

War of words

Tom Clancy is a unique figure within the game industry – no other author has so successfully pitched themselves as a gaming brand. Clive Barker is perhaps the only other comparable figure, and his games have numbered just three since 1990, with the upcoming *Jericho* making four. Clearly, Clancy is in another league altogether, with *EndWar* being his 23rd game to go into development, not even counting expansions and alternate versions for different platforms. Despite owning the military shooter genre, can Clancy really extend his dominion into strategy as well? Probably – though, with a title like *EndWar*, it's difficult to foresee a sequel.

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBA**

Beautiful Katamari

The Prince is back, but can he still shake the room?

The central mechanic of rolling and collecting remains as appealing as ever, but *Katamari*'s visual style is even more striking in HD



Katamari started as an experiment and became a mega-hit franchise worldwide, and it now faces the problem of other surprise hits: how to stretch a concept. Going beyond the original while keeping the fun and unique identity that made it so popular is the challenge for *Beautiful Katamari*, but adding to this difficulty is the technological leap made since the original: can Namco deliver the *Katamari* experience on PS3 and 360?

The core concept of the game won't be changing, nor will the controls. Rather, the jump in hardware power has been directed toward the stages, which are huge in comparison to the PS2 original and offer a much higher level of detail. That doesn't mean the graphics are more realistic: they keep the very same style, but with many more objects of all sizes on screen. More enticingly, your ball can now reach biblical proportions, growing to a size of at least 10,000km.

In addition to the prince, there are around 50 characters the player will be able to switch between. These characters will have little effect on how the game plays, but provide a touch of customisation in taste or mood. How far this personalisation of your character will go beyond simply gaining accessories is yet to be seen, although an online feature will allow users to show their character to others.

Other online modes have not yet been revealed, although downloadable content has already been confirmed, while network play modes to allow versus and co-op play have been strongly rumoured but remain speculation at the moment.

Perhaps the biggest surprise with *Beautiful Katamari* is that it's not a Sony exclusive. Namco's clear statement that "all the users and fans don't have a PS3" will doubtless delight 360 fans – and Namco also indicated that the controls will alter between the 360 and the PS3 due to the slight difference in stick placement between the pads. But perhaps the most joyous piece of news is confirmation of a long-running rumour: a version of *Beautiful Katamari* is being created for the Wii, to the anticipation of Remotes worldwide.

Mobile Suit Gundam MS Sensen 0079

You came in that thing? You're braver than I thought

FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **BANDAI NAMCO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **JULY 26 (JAPAN) TBA (US, UK)**

Gundam is the Star Wars of Japan. It is a tradition to see it on any major gaming platform launched on the market, and a requirement for a machine's success: hence the rushed PS3 title that failed to deliver on its early technical promises, hence the 360 version being delayed for more work. And now, in a move that's no great surprise, a Wii version has been announced: *MS Sensen 0079*. There is one real surprise, however: the July release date.

Wii *Gundam* is an FPS, with the player seated inside their mech's cockpit. Mech movement is straightforward enough and controlled with the Nunchuk, using the C button to lock targets and Z trigger to dash or jump. The real fun comes from the Remote: aiming and firing weapons with precision, or using a beam saber in close combat. The usual weapons are in place, most notably a sniper rifle which can be toggled with the Remote's D-pad. To add some tactics to the proceedings, damage dealt to your enemies will be localised as in *Target In Sight*.

Your character, New Type, also has certain special talents. Any imminent danger will be flagged with an on-screen animation, allowing time to dodge, while special moves can be prepared and triggered with a gauge on the right side of the screen, requiring the player to shake the Remote in a certain way.

For those who try to keep up with Gundam's sprawling universe, the storyline is set within the original One Year War, and heroes from various Gundam iterations will pop up, including some from the Sega Saturn trilogy *The Blue Destiny*. Ace Pilot mode will also let players experience some famous sequences first-hand.

As well as the singleplayer campaign, other modes confirmed so far are VS, Survival, Combination and Gallery. Finally, it is also possible to personalise your Mobile Suit, though compared to some avatar creation kits, *Gundam* is basic, allowing only five locations to be coloured. So, basic bright colours, sniper rifles, hulking mechs and beam sabers. In Japan, at least, it's where the force lies.



Gunplay will no doubt be incorporated with ease, but making swordplay work convincingly will be trickier





Gundam titles are treated with such bewilderment in the west that the odd great title has been missed. The controls have been incorporated into *Sensen 0079* with a care that might make it a good import for game-starved UK Wii owners









The dual combat system allows for some truly satisfying combo action, good timing giving damage multipliers needed for some of the game's more bizarre foes. Battlin frogs and were-creatures is all in a day's work for Neku

Subarashiki Kono Sekai

It may be full of death and evil, but Square's world still looks wonderful

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **JULY 27 (JAPAN), TBA (UK, US)**



Stand by me

Director **Tatsuya Kando** has been explicit about making a "grown up game about growing up," and perhaps has found the perfect representation of teenage angst in Neku's empathic powers. Certainly, the darker themes that the trailer implies lie behind the Shinigami organisation's takeover and Neku's own role in defending his home allow considerable scope for a coming-of-age story.

But it could be the realistic setting that lends it the authenticity needed to appeal to its young target audience: the environments are permeated with virtual representations of real-world shops, paths and landmarks from Shibuya. When asked about the choice of setting, and why it had been recreated with such fidelity, Kando's answer is admirably logical: "Because that is where the young kids hang around in reality, and we want them to recognise it."

The game that once had the working title of *It's A Wonderful World* was recently hands-on at the Square Enix party, and looks to be one of the highlights of a crowded DS summer. In this scrolling action RPG you control a young boy named Neku with empathic powers who's accompanied by one of four friends. Waking up in the middle of an unfamiliar Shibuya, Neku starts to investigate what has changed, and is thrown into 'Death's Game'.

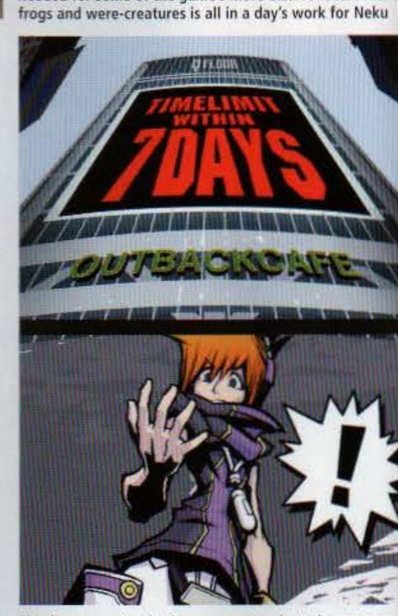
The creation of the evil Shinigami organisation, which has taken over Shibuya, Neku is forced to play the game and must somehow win within seven days or be wiped from existence. The characters and setting throw more than a passing wave to *Jet Set Radio*, from the cel-shaded look to the J-pop soundtrack, even going so far as Neku's hobby being graffiti and the stylised black-purple wings of Shinigami members.

Neku's empathic powers allow him to read individual thoughts from the crowds that fill the streets, and find 'Noise' – which will be essential to solving the puzzles that Death's Game throws up. When using these powers, the screen loses colour but highlights things of importance and, most interestingly, Neku can also learn thoughts which can then be implanted in the heads of others to affect their actions. But by far the most common element of the game, at least in the demo, is combat, and it's here that *Subarashiki Kono Sekai* really sets itself apart.

The major feature, which will hopefully have wider implications for the design of DS action games, is that it actually uses both screens, the gameplay avoiding domination of the top screen while a relatively useless world map or perfunctory special attack loiters on the touchscreen. Combat takes place on both screens using the stylus and D-pad respectively, with Neku and his partners battling a range of unusually realised monsters, from boxing kangaroos to angry penguins. Although attempting to concentrate on two screens full of visual flair is initially confusing, after a brief period you can tune into the various cues designed to direct the eyes and begin combination attacks that juggle energy between characters while moving both simultaneously to avoid attack. Offensive moves can be physical attacks or telekinetic ones, but quickly switching between the two (to knock an enemy backwards with telekinesis, for example, then teleport ahead of their movement in order to deliver a punch to the back of the head) will quickly dispatch any foes. The use of the touchscreen varies depending on which of the 300 or more badges Neku has equipped (he can wear a maximum of six), but range from tapping an enemy for a fireball-esque ranged attack to slashing across and backwards quickly for a double arm-swing. But to reach a level of constant combinations and dodging proves surprisingly difficult, and *Subarashiki Kono Sekai* looks set be a sizeable challenge.



The health and attack power of both characters are linked, and learning to chain attacks is as much about an aware defence as it is the breathtaking offensive moves



The focus on using both screens extends to the cutscenes being shown in what we might call highscreen. The game has all the charm that the visuals suggest, and the solid, bright colour palette is maintained throughout

The game is not yet confirmed for localisation, but noises from Square Enix imply that an American release is inevitable, albeit not under the title of *It's A Wonderful World* thanks to copyright issues. It's certainly different from a lot of DS experiments doing the rounds, and might just offer a wonderful experience all its own.



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **GRIN**
ORIGIN: **SWEDEN**
RELEASE: **JUNE**

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2

A complete refit for the PC promises not to inspire déjà vu



Peeking out from cover doesn't switch you into thirdperson – you can only lean out, poking your head into the path of enemy fire but giving you a good view of your targets

When GRIN says it has re-imagined *GRAW2* for the PC it's impossible not to feel a stab of scepticism. It's rather unfortunate for the developer that the common usage of the term 're-imagined' seems to be as a euphemism, paradoxically concealing a complete failure of imagination – unfortunate because GRIN's promises that it's completely refitted the tactical shooter for the PC seem to be largely true.

GRAW2 PC still follows the plot of the console version, more or less, and utilises some of the same video and audio clips to structure the missions. But the execution is otherwise unique, with entirely new levels that carry forward the ambition to create a more hardcore tactical shooter for PC players. Introductions to the missions are made through a detailed briefing screen, rather than via the cinematic helicopter rides that are a signature of *GRAW* as we know it on consoles. Models and weapons have also been redesigned from the ground up.

The differences don't end with the appearance: there are significant gameplay changes, too. The game takes place

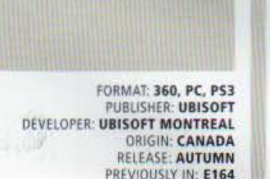




In the same vein as the first *GRAW*, the PC game is played in firstperson. Despite no doubt increasing immersion, it means you can't admire your nicely-rendered back

entirely in firstperson, with the cover options pruned back and many of the facilities at your disposal altered in their operation; the UAV, squad commands and cross-com function in very different ways from the console version, making best use of the keyboard control scheme.

While it's good that Ubisoft tries to avoid imposing inappropriate gameplay on to different platforms, the opaque naming policy causes confusion as to what the game actually contains and, as a result, GRIN's quite different offering will inevitably not receive the attention it might have.



Assassin's Creed

Ubisoft tantalises with further glimpses of its stunning-looking medieval action adventure

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT MONTREAL**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E164**

Although little of the game has been shown since last September, *Assassin's Creed* has continued to top lists of the most anticipated upcoming games. Finally, with a hands-on demo being prepared for July, the hype machine is ever so slowly lumbering back into action – its frustrating sloth an acknowledgement of how exceptionally good first impressions of the game have been and, as a result, how little is required to whet appetites further.

All that was dangled before the press at Ubisoft's recent conference in Paris (more on which next month) was a slick trailer showing off the acrobatic flair of protagonist and master assassin Altair as he seeks out his targets – scaling walls, vaulting across roofs, blending with crowds, attacking and parrying with elegant swordsmanship.

Though the video succeeded in its intention of to rallying slavering enthusiasm for the title, it was difficult to judge how the game has progressed since its last outing before the press. Producer Jade Raymond



Assassin's Creed employs a technology that makes any jutting piece of geometry a possible handhold – allowing Altair to nimbly scale most items of scenery – leading to moments of scenic beauty like this





Altair and the Assassin clan side neither with the Crusaders nor with the Saracens – their targets are simply those who profit from and perpetuate the conflict

was on hand, however, to assure everyone that development continues apace – the beautifully recreated 12th century cities of the Holy Land have become 15 times larger than previously seen.

It's also becoming clear just how vast and detailed an area exists between the cities, and how freely it can be explored, offering side-quests which affect your chances of success on the main objectives; Altair's benefactors will help him escape by blocking pursuers, or help him get closer to targets.

The promise of a twist that brings the plot into modern relevance suggests the ambition doesn't stop with the open-ended environments and non-linear structure – a balancing of adrenalising action with intelligent story-telling which looks set to establish *Assassin's Creed* as a defining game of this generation.



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **K2 NETWORK (ONLINE), ELEPHANT ENTERTAINMENT (RETAIL)**
DEVELOPER: **IMC GAMES**
ORIGIN: **KOREA**
RELEASE: **SUMMER**



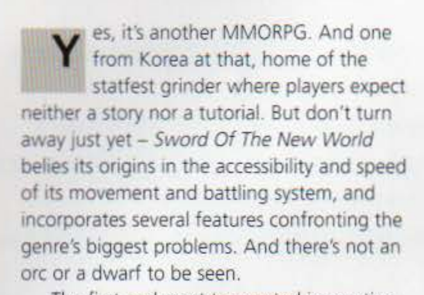
Sword Of The New World

IMC Games is bring Korea's favourite MMORPG to western shores, but will it convert non-believers?

Yes, it's another MMORPG. And one from Korea at that, home of the statfest grinder where players expect neither a story nor a tutorial. But don't turn away just yet – *Sword Of The New World* belies its origins in the accessibility and speed of its movement and battling system, and incorporates several features confronting the genre's biggest problems. And there's not an orc or a dwarf to be seen.

The first and most trumpeted innovation is that you control a party of three characters at all times: no more will you have to wait for a beefcake warrior or wizard before entering a dungeon, and then despair when they leave to make a cup of tea just as you get to the boss. Simply bring some along from the roster of up to 32 characters that can be kept in your quarters. There are five different character classes, with the expected variation in skillsets and a number of different stances for each of them, as well as a bewildering array of weapons and armour.

They'll be needed for the wide variety of player-versus-player modes, which escalate from family-vs-family (your characters are part of your family and thus share a surname) to faction-vs-faction. Over 150 locations guarantee a long trek for the dedicated adventurer, and the graphical effects, from sunlight reflecting on a moat to the absence of scene lines in brick walls, make it a beautiful one. *Sword Of The New World* doesn't look like a new beginning for MMORPGs, but the elegant stylings and player interface mean it may offer the kind of refinements that can make the old seem new again.





Well-integrated hotkeys will let you switch quickly between individuals and the whole party, while a banding effect will stop them becoming too dispersed



The entire game is wonderfully detailed, although completely scalable. The beautifully baroque stylings are claimed, oddly enough, to have been inspired by the fair British isles

GrimGrimoire

Vanillaware compacts the RPG arts into an RTS, but isn't looking to rewrite any books

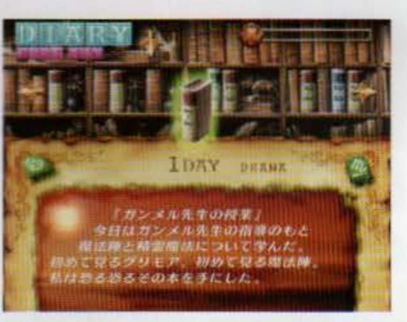
FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2007**

Even when Nippon Ichi is wearing just its publishing hat, there's still a very natural selection to the projects it rears. Vanillaware's realtime strategy outing bears certain 2D SRPG hallmarks proudly, trumping past NI titles with presentation that goes beyond merely vibrant and into something almost artsy – the studio is just two games old (along with Atlus-published *Odin Sphere*), and it's already carving out its own thick, richly-painted alcove. Cutscenes, acted by flat cutouts, have literal life breathed into them as the overlapping folds of character detail rise and fall, and the backdrops offer some parallax motion as the camera pans between speakers; menus, too, offer magnetic colour and liveliness.

Once on the playing field, though, *GrimGrimoire* feels like it isn't going to take a cattle prod to the genre in a similar manner to, say, *Disgaea*. Players begin each battle – staged on a short tower of stacked floors – by ordering troops to mine mana from rune stones, which can then be used to craft various other units. These are then employed for their attack, defence or support skills, and issued simple commands to roam the map, seek out enemy bases or just hold the allied fort while under attack. While there are deeper details at work in a catalogue of mana types that dictate which units can be created, it's likely not the kind of strategy excursion that'll lure established RTS players. Instead, it seems to serve as an experience capable of introducing those captivated by its plush RPG flair to territory into which they rarely venture.



Though each of the four mana categories offers its own monsters, there's little room for flexibility, with scenarios often demanding the application of certain unit traits

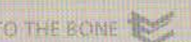




Cleared stages can be revisited, while difficult bonus trials are included as a parallel option. *GrimGrimoire* can feel stressful and relentless all too swiftly, but a sub-easy difficulty setting (known as 'Sweet') helps smooth out the climb

BAD TO THE BONE

DICE ATTEMPTS TO SHAKE UP ITS MILITARY SHOOTER HERITAGE WIT
A GAME THAT ALLOWS YOU TO DISOBEY ORDERS – AND PLAY ALON

TITLE: **BATTLEFIELD: BAD COMPANY**
FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **DICE**
ORIGIN: **SWEDEN**
RELEASE: **SUMMER 2008**

DICE's *Battlefield* is a franchise of the strongest multiplayer pedigree. Its first instalment for the PC was a major innovation in the field of FPS online gaming, bringing up to 64 players in five classes and a tremendously varied range of vehicles, aircraft and ships to its World War II setting. Later games have leapt wildly through history, but all have been consistent in realising an increasingly ambitious scale.

With *Bad Company*, however, DICE has decided to supplement this core competency with a singleplayer campaign. It's not, however, a token effort entailing a string of botmatches, and nor does DICE settle for appending its successful multiplayer formula with the simulacra of other war games' solo campaigns. Instead, *Bad Company* promises singleplayer missions that are themselves as distinctive as the original *Battlefield* was in its execution of multiplayer.

The way that DICE has distanced itself from other military shooters is by bravely rejecting one of the genre's most enduring tropes: that you play as the good guys, acting on unquestionable authority. Since the shooter's heritage lies in recreating World War II from the perspective of the Allied forces, it's not hard to see how this trait has become so pervasive. Even in those few games which have made the occasional nod to the crises of morality that conflict entails, it has been done so only in the context of endlessly mowing down a faceless, anonymous mass of enemies whose imminent bloody demise serves the greater good. It's telling that, with the exception of the few laughable attempts made by far-right propagandists, no shooter has made the Axis playable except in multiplayer; videogames have yet even to play with the simplistic notion of 'the Good German'.

While *Bad Company* (probably rather wisely) doesn't try to rehabilitate the Nazi foot soldier, it does approach the representation of modern conflict with a cutting cynicism, presenting a grunt's-eye view of a war whose reason is completely abstracted from the experience of the soldiers fighting it. As with so many innovations in games, films got there first, and *Bad Company* owes much of its inspiration to Kelly's Heroes and Three Kings. Just as in those films, greed serves as the initial motivation for the disillusioned protagonists of *Bad Company* to disobey orders and cause havoc. Although DICE refused to be drawn on how this plot develops, if the much-emphasised similarities with Three Kings go deeper, we can speculate that this greed will be the instigator for a story that may get complicated by other more moral issues.

Unlike those films, however, *Bad Company* doesn't set out to describe a real-world conflict, instead choosing a fictional Eastern Bloc country of the near future for its setting. Here we find B Company, or 'Bad Company' as they are appropriately nicknamed – a mismatched collection of malcontents and venal opportunists, whose total lack of interest in the conflict occurring around them is supplanted by a very sincere interest in a stash of gold bullion. In order to pursue it, however, they will have to flaunt the orders of their superiors and international law – and they do so in a highly explosive fashion.

An extensive weather effects system creates dramatic changes in the landscape – as you cross the border, the yellowing evening sun is blotted out by clouds, imbuing the area with a sense of threat



BREAKING POINTS

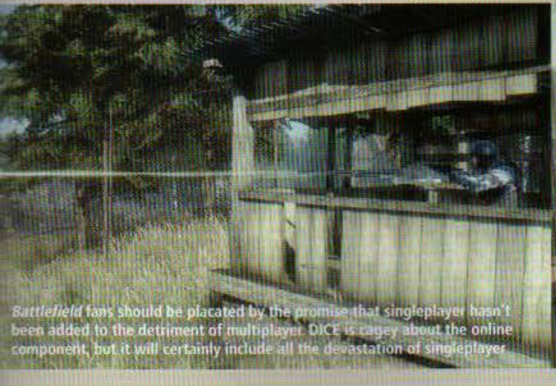
The 360 version of *Bad Company* promises a large number of light-hearted Achievements, many of which should encourage your wilful and reckless use of arms to reduce scenery to smoking rubble. Although the physics of the buildings themselves is not quite sophisticated enough for you to undercut them and watch them slowly fall in on themselves, cutting down trees sees the mighty timbers topple in realistic fashion. Cut down enough and you get the Lumberjack Achievement. It's likely that, by the time *Bad Company* gets released, Sony will have caught up and its trophy room will offer similar support.

An early mission begins with the protagonist, new to the unit, staring out at an impressive vista of water, woodland and hills, as generated by the accomplished Frostbite engine. His squadmates Sarge, Sweetwater and Haggard can be heard conspiring to disobey the explicit orders they've just been given and cross the border into a country not directly involved in the current conflict. The characters are rendered with humour, but are essentially familiar – Sarge: the hard-talking man in charge and tactician; Sweetwater: the wit and brains, in charge of communications and a heavy machine gun; Haggard: a slow-witted hick with a penchant for massive explosions. As the conversation ends, the mission objective pops up on to the screen: 'Invade neutral country.'

At all points the craven immorality of their actions is offset by a black humour that extends down from the wry dialogue to the pyrotechnic liberties taken with realism. For all its daring in deviating from the usual military shooter storyline, *Bad Company* doesn't take itself seriously, and this is especially evident in the game's delightfully excessive obsession with destruction. Adopting a technology rapidly becoming popular among shooters, *Bad Company*'s environments are almost wholly destroyable, and the game definitely doesn't skimp on the tools to allow you to explore this feature.

Among the arsenal at your disposal are a variety of weapons and gadgets capable of reducing buildings to their constituent parts by spectacular means. The most immediately useful, and most easily equipped, is the grenade launcher attachment to the assault rifle, happily popping open holes in any structure lying in front of you. Grenades can also be tossed and C4 attached to walls, floors and the sides of vehicles, but by far the most impressive blast is the result of a mortar strike, which you can call in via a stolen Russian targeting device. It takes a few seconds for the target to be acquired, during which time you'll need to be in its line of sight, but the resulting destruction is worth the risk of exposure – reducing any building to a brutalised and smoking shell.

As you might expect, the ability to blow holes through any impediment radically extends the range of strategies you can use to achieve an objective. Following the invasion of the neutral country, for example, you discover your objective to be already occupied by hapless Russian forces. As the greenest member of the team, you are elected to lead the assault. Of course, rather than stumble into the chokepoint created by fortifications around the main road, you can flank around, find yourself an unscaleable but unguarded length of concrete and wire, and breach it messily with a grenade.





Battlefield fans should be placated by the promise that singleplayer hasn't been added to the detriment of multiplayer. DICE is cagey about the online component, but it will certainly include all the devastation of singleplayer

A SOUND IDEA

Now that environmental graphical realism has reached a new plateau, audio is becoming the next fidelity frontier, and DICE is keen to show off its High Dynamic Range sound system. It's a clever piece of technology that prioritises sounds and plays those of most importance at loud volumes while reducing sounds of lesser significance. The upshot is that, if you're driving along with the jeep's stereo pumping, a sudden hail of bullets directed at your windscreen will take precedence over your in-car entertainment, and the volume levels will automatically adjust to prevent such important noises getting lost in a wall of sound.

There is no shortage of other alternatives – and the AI will have to be suitably adaptable in the final code in order to react realistically to the variety of attacks the player can launch. Already, the Russian soldiers congregate around the greatest threat, whether that is the player or one of his squadmates. Climbing into an anti-aircraft turret will immediately attract a great deal of attention but, equally, it's possible to let the rest of your unit take the flak as you sneak around the back unnoticed.

While your teammates are competent enough (and apparently invulnerable in the version of the game we played), they don't seem to be able to use many of the game's more memorable pieces of gadgetry, such as the Russian mortar strike, or that which you find within the sniper kit-bag: arguably the most hilariously devastating device in the game, you use a pair of binoculars to paint a laser target on a vehicle, before switching your point of view to that controlling the descent of a missile as it plunges through layers of cloud towards the red beacon. DICE is apologetic about how difficult it is to successfully land on target, as the assembled press detonate bridges, buildings, themselves – anything but the tank they were set to destroy. Yet, considering that the overhead view gives a canny player the opportunity to purposefully miss, and bury the missile anywhere on the map, whether in his line of sight or not, it seems for the best that it is tricky to use.

As with previous *Battlefield* games, vehicles play an important role, not least in the navigation of the huge levels – each a sprawling landscape encompassing 1,024 square kilometres. By and large, their implementation doesn't seem to have greatly changed – still with instantaneous entry and exit, and still finding the right compromise between realistic physics and accessible handling. As well as the ground vehicles in evidence, which include jeeps, tanks and APCs, helicopters are also confirmed as useable trānsport, enabling a speed and ease of travel that justifies the vast size of the environments.

It's not yet clear how much of those 1,024 square kilometres you will be required to explore, but maps certainly aren't restricted to a single mission, necessitating your travel across them to different objectives. It's startling to see how far we've come since the release of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* last year, the landscapes of which were prone to sudden texture-scaling and geometry pop-in. Here, there is almost no noticeable flaw in the landscape as you power along in a jeep or as you plunge your missile towards the ground.

The scale of the levels also allows for a degree of freedom in the mission progression structure. Sometimes, areas of the map activate as you play, channelling the player through a more linear mission structure, but other times the gameplay is freeform – with the player able to choose the order in which objectives are approached. Even when given specific directions, there is some flexibility: ignore them and head off in a different direction, or directly contravene them, and you will be issued with new ones appropriate to your updated situation.

It seems like DICE is determined to bring the wild diversity of action seen in its multiplayer games to the singleplayer experience, offering just as many opportunities to charge up the style and pace of gameplay. There's no doubt that the basic mechanics in place work and work well, and the destruction of the environment is deeply satisfying to the point that it is almost compulsive. This alone allows for a freedom of movement and tactics that should prove diverting – so long as the enemy AI is up to it.

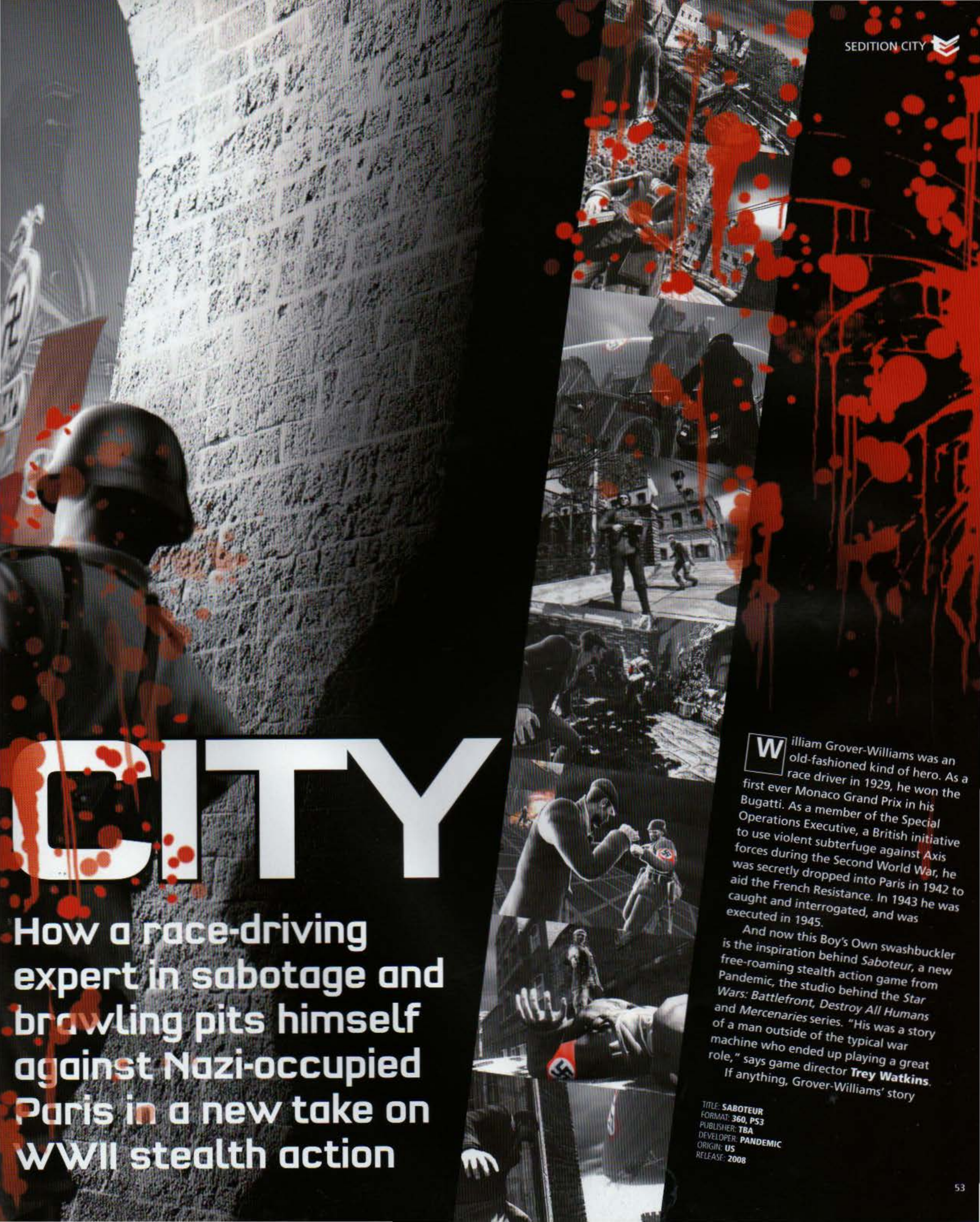
Of course, whether the singleplayer story arc is executed with enough finesse and variety to maintain interest is something that will only reveal itself as we find out more about the direction the plot takes, and the kind of missions with which you are later tasked. However, the early signs are that DICE is determined to plough a slightly different furrow to other military shooters, and hopefully by taking its game into an area of blackly humorous amorality, it will produce a title that forces the genre to re-examine the kind of stories it's possible to tell within the context of a war.

IT'S STARTLING TO SEE HOW FAR WE'VE COME SINCE THE RELEASE OF OBLIVION LAST YEAR



The fact that the game is being developed for consoles should ensure that a focus on gameplay appropriate to those systems is maintained. DICE has suggested that other *Battlefield* projects are in the works for PC audiences


SEDITION
NSDAP



CITY

How a race-driving expert in sabotage and brawling pits himself against Nazi-occupied Paris in a new take on WWII stealth action

William Grover-Williams was an old-fashioned kind of hero. As a race driver in 1929, he won the first ever Monaco Grand Prix in his Bugatti. As a member of the Special Operations Executive, a British initiative to use violent subterfuge against Axis forces during the Second World War, he was secretly dropped into Paris in 1942 to aid the French Resistance. In 1943 he was caught and interrogated, and was executed in 1945.

And now this Boy's Own swashbuckler is the inspiration behind *Saboteur*, a new free-roaming stealth action game from Pandemic, the studio behind the *Star Wars: Battlefront*, *Destroy All Humans* and *Mercenaries* series. "His was a story of a man outside of the typical war machine who ended up playing a great role," says game director **Trey Watkins**.

If anything, Grover-Williams' story

TITLE: **SABOTEUR**
FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **TBA**
DEVELOPER: **PANDEMIC**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2008**

also tells something about *Saboteur* itself, which, though set in a WWII universe, aims to operate outside of the way that now-hoary backdrop is usually treated. "There's been a lot of great WWII games that have recreated some intense scenes and memorable moments, but we're not going for that," says producer **Phil Hong**. "We're going for the personal story."

Set in a fully open rendition of Paris as well as aspects of surrounding France – apparently stretching out as far as Le Havre in one direction and the Alps in the other – *Saboteur* follows the exploits of Sean, an Irish ex-pat race driver. On seeing his friends and family murdered by German soldiers he goes out to exact revenge in a story told *GTA*-style through missions given out by characters spread throughout the city.





"JAZZ PROVIDES A GREAT COUNTERPOINT TO THE ACTION, BUT IT ALSO GIVES A SEEDY VIBE THAT THE UNDERWORLD OF PARIS OFFERED AT THIS TIME"

Any overhang that looks like it can be gripped can be used to climb the buildings, lending a new verticality to the all-too-familiar WWII setting

"Occupied Paris in the middle of the war is unlike anywhere else in history," says Watkins. "You have this city of life that's known for its beauty and passion, with one of the most evil regimes ever to come about, so it's an interesting play between these two forces."

Pandemic has expressed this interplay with an elegant system it rather inelegantly calls 'will to fight'. Areas where Nazi forces are strong and the local population is oppressed are depicted in stark black and white and spot colour. It sounds like the effect used in Schindler's List, with the little girl's red coat, a symbol of hope, the only colour to be seen. "It's actually more similar to Sin City," clarifies Watkins. "The only colour is the crimson of the Nazi banners, and the blood and explosions. So you get this visceral impact of the suppressive feel of the Nazi presence."

As Sean completes missions, colour begins to seep into areas, making them look richer and more vibrant. The effect isn't only visual – cafes will play German news and marching music in oppressed areas, and jazz in liberated ones.



Saboteur's France is an almost comic-book place of cobbles and chateaux rather than the gun-metal grit of most games using this wartime setting

The 'will to fight' system, as the name implies, is a play mechanic too. Locals will scuttle and creep nervously around in Nazi-oppressed areas, refusing to talk to Sean, but once liberated they'll behave more confidently and even pick up weapons and help him out if he gets involved in a scuffle.

The system also provides a graceful way of expressing player progression in the world. "Literally you can climb up to the top of a building and look out across Paris and see the pockets of colour where you've had an impact and pockets of black and white where





Nazis still hold control – so it shows where you can still go and do things," says Watkins.

"There's an ebb and flow of the will to fight that's tied to what the player is doing as well as certain story events that might trigger changes," continues Hong. "Liberated areas may return to being oppressed. But we're not designing this mechanic to be managed like in an RTS, and we're not guiding players toward thinking they should liberate the entire city. The ultimate goal is to exact revenge on the people that have wronged Sean at the beginning of the game."

The revenge theme is reflected in *Saboteur*'s gritty and noir-ish characterisation, underscored by its big-band jazz soundtrack. "We feel jazz provides a great counterpoint to the action we're showing, but it also gives a live and seedy vibe that the underworld of Paris offered at this time," explains Watkins. "It's like the way the theremin was the signature to *Destroy All Humans*' 1950s vibe," says Hong.

Sean himself is a bruiser. "He's an Irishman, a rough-and-tumble bar-room brawler – a darker hero. You'll never see him in uniform, and certainly not a tuxedo," says Hong. As such, Pandemic has concentrated on *Saboteur*'s melee system, which will reflect an Indiana Jones-style 'putting up the dukes' approach to fighting. That said, the game will also include a full selection of guns.

Crucial to *Saboteur*'s basic play style, Sean is athletic, too. Pandemic, along with Ubisoft with *Assassin's Creed*, has been caught by the parkour bug, so

Though guns are available, Pandemic is keen to emphasise *Saboteur's* larger-than-life fisticuffs-style melee fighting scheme

much time will be spent scaling Paris' walls and rooftops with an 'if it looks like you can climb, you can' clambering system. "Paris is a bit of an urban jungle gym for Sean," explains Watkins.

The clambering system also defines *Saboteur's* stealth mechanic, which is less about vision cones and laboriously clinging to the shadows than it is action. "When Sean screws up and the alarms go off, it makes getting away from that situation just as fun as getting into it. It's not about hitting the reload button like in more traditional stealth games," Watkins elaborates.

"One way to phrase it might be quiet in and loud out," says Hong. Stealth in *Saboteur* won't get in the way of its rip-roaring tale. It doesn't sound like it will be too simplistic, however. Sean will be able to wear enemy uniforms to disguise himself, and the game will feature a suspicion system that will affect his freedom to walk through controlled areas.

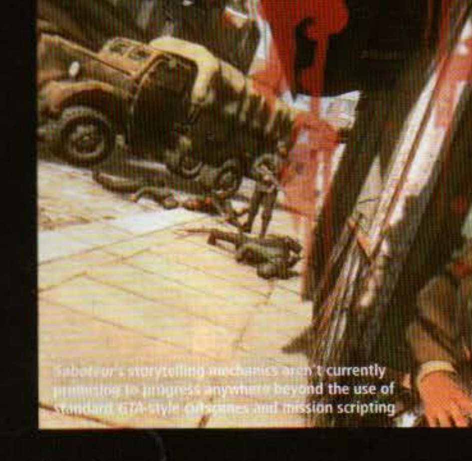
True to his identity as a racing driver, Sean will also be able to drive any vehicle he can see in the environment, from motorcycles to tanks and boats. "We don't like to present players with something they can't interact with," says Watkins. "True to that form, you'll be able to do a whole host of things that applies across the world. If a Nazi is using a weapon you will too."

Watkins feels this is the basis of the open world game. "If someone is in a location you can go there too. That's at the core of the open world spirit – allowing players to play the way they want to. Our job is to enable them," he says. Though he and Hong are at this stage reluctant to explain exactly how *Saboteur* will incorporate Paris as well as enough of France to encompass Le Havre and the Alps, they are clear that Sean will freely be able to travel between them. They're also keen to point out that this is a version of France tuned for gaming. "This isn't *True Crime Paris*, where there are a bunch of twisty little streets that don't have any gameplay in them," says Watkins, who worked on that series for Activision.

So far, *Saboteur's* atmospheric yet rough-and-tumble take on open world game-making looks like it could settle nicely between the superhero bombast of *Crackdown* and the down-to-earth satire of *GTA*. And, if nothing else, the will to fight system looks like it could introduce new dynamism to such open game environments.

BIOSHARE

Pandemic has multiple studios: the LA one *Saboteur* is being developed in, the Brisbane studio, which is working on currently undisclosed projects, and a partner company – *Mass Effect* and *Baldur's Gate* creator BioWare – with which Pandemic 'joined forces' in late 2005. Watkins is anxious to emphasise the levels of sharing expertise between each team and studio. Principal to *Saboteur* are discussions with BioWare about storytelling, though the ins and outs of the full narrative are still under wraps. However, even the possibility of a morally ambiguous tale of revenge set in the streets of Nazi-occupied Paris sounds rather delicious.



Saboteur's storytelling mechanics aren't currently promising to progress anywhere beyond the use of standard *GTA*-style cutscenes and mission scripting





Flash Flood

How web-based entertainment is evolving thanks to a new wave of slick, amateur-driven games...

YouTube. Flickr. MySpace. Wikipedia. *Second Life*. Bored yet? Probably. We've had the message of how these web phenomena epitomise the user-generated content revolution excitably rammed down our throats for what seems like years. Yet the sites that really kickstarted the movement hardly get a mention.

Newgrounds.com, the large Flash games and animation site that spawned *Alien Hominid*, has been accepting user-produced submissions since 1999. That it has been quietly spearheading for eight years what is only now being trumpeted about in the mainstream media is indicative of how overlooked the Flash games scene is. Flash games are, after all, easy to write off as derivative and scrappy, good for a minute's cheap entertainment and little more.



Socially Flashworking

New to the Flash game portal scene is Kongregate, which has been billed the 'YouTube for games', a reference to the way it allows its users to upload their own games and comment on those posted. But as co-founder Greer says: "That describes Newgrounds perfectly well too, so that's not enough. We're also trying to be the Xbox Live of Flash games." The site holds time-restricted challenges on certain games, rewarding players with cards for its upcoming collectable card game, awards points to users for uploading games, rating them and participating in other activities, and features a chat channel alongside each game. With a pleasantly clean design that efficiently points newcomers toward the best games and its ad revenue-sharing scheme, Kongregate could prove to be a valuable asset to the Flash gaming scene.

But now, Flash gaming is undergoing a blossoming of activity and creativity. The people who make the games, often teenage bedroom coders, are getting paid for their efforts. They're used to the idea of creating something and putting it up on the web for all to see, and new websites are springing up to capitalise on their work. Flash itself is becoming more powerful as a gaming platform. And, perhaps most importantly of all, the scene is at the centre of the rise of 'casual' gaming.

"The rise of quick pick-up-and-play games is an important development, and Flash games mirror their rise in mainstream gaming," says **John Bardinelli**, contributor to casual gaming site Jayisgames.com. And because most web browsers can use Flash, playing a game through them is an effortless pleasure: "In the same way that short-form viral videos have taken off, I think we're seeing the same things for web games," says **Jim Greer**, co-founder of Kongregate.com.

"Digg has a section devoted to them, and 90 per cent are Flash. When one gets to the front page, the hits rocket – games three years ago never achieved the same levels of audience awareness."

"The rise of quick pick-up-and-play games is an important development"



Such popularity is beginning to earn the game makers money. Newgrounds, which receives around 500,000 visitors a day with 200 game and animation submissions, each month awards the top ten contributors, as voted by users, $250. Kongregate, which was launched in December 2006 (see 'Socially Flashworking'), gives its game-makers a cut of up to 50 per cent of the ad revenue their games generate.

Meanwhile, companies like Crazy Monkey Games and Armor Games have begun to sponsor games in return for them featuring their logos and linking to their sites – both Flash game portals that earn money on advertising revenue. It's in both parties' interest that the games are featured on as many other websites as possible. "This way we get some promotion of our website in exchange for the sponsorship," says **John West**, head of Crazy Monkey Games, who believes his was the first company to offer such deals. "The game developer keeps the copyright on the game, art, characters and so on."

West believes that the money a good game designer can earn is helping Flash games become better. "We're seeing more and more games being developed, and the quality level going way up as developers devote more time and energy to their games," he says. "People who used to develop these games for fun in their spare time quit their day jobs to earn their living developing games full time, and I see this market as continuing to grow very quickly. There's plenty of demand from players for new browser-based games, and plenty of demand from websites like ours for new games."



Drakojan Skies Acolytes is a spectacular and carefully crafted shooter that took its creator, German graphic design student 'OmegaDragon3000', two years to make

Defend Atlantis



The Super Flash Bros

This reimagining of *Missile Command* sees you defending a city against errant divers and explosive barrels by drawing bubbles with the mouse to bounce them aside. Take a look at *Red*, too, another city-defender that features more engaging physics.

Bowmaster Prelude



Lost Vectors

Featuring a baroque mix of real-time strategy and *Worms*-style trajectory shooting with RPG elements, *Bowmaster*'s long-term charms see you defending your castle with a range of different projectiles and land-based troops.







Castle Crashers is the latest XBLA game from Alien Hominid creator The Behemoth. Though it retains Flash aesthetics, the team hasn't yet decided whether to release it in any form on the format

One of West's sponsored developers is **Sean Cooper**, creator of the Boxhead games and an ex-Bullfrog and EA programmer who decided to go freelance working in Flash. "There is money in Flash, there's a lot of ad revenue being made," he says. "I can't guess what these guys are making out of the games I'm developing but I'm doing really well out of it." Sponsorship means that he's paid as soon as a game is completed, sometimes being offered a share of ad revenue, too, and his experience means that he can command the best rates.

Cooper decided to make the move into working with Flash because he was becoming frustrated with how much influence he felt marketing was having on commercial game creation, with fresh ideas suffering at its hands. "With games like *Syndicate* we designed them for us to play in the office, not for a market, and with Flash games I can go back to that 1993 time. I control everything, and that's a key thing for any creator," he explains. That said, he did use comments made on newsgroups and forums to inform the design direction Boxhead took so it ticked the boxes of what the public wanted – in this case, guns and zombies.

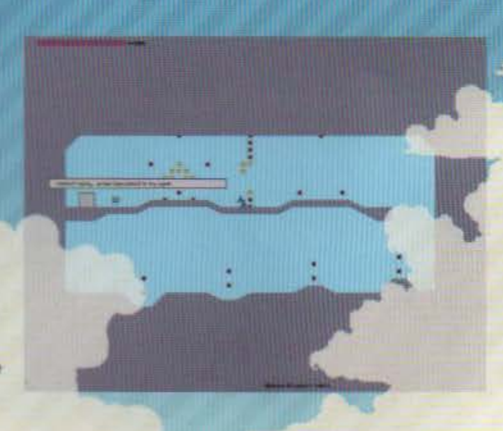
Brad Borne is a more archetypal Flash game designer. Currently a student, he's the creator of *Fancy Pants Adventure*, a hugely popular platform game with a drawn graphic style. He began creating Flash games because he had always wanted to make videogames. "Playing videogames with my friends was a big part of my childhood, so I guess I just always felt like it was something that I should try to do," he says. His Flash games have earned him a good deal of money: "More than most guys in college, and enough to pursue it as a career, at least for a while."

Borne chose to work with Flash because it complemented his graphic style and way of working: "Flash is a medium that lends itself to homemade-feeling animations and games, and I'm the kind of guy who loves seeing pencil marks in old cartoons, so I guess it just seemed right for me to work in Flash."

Flash development focuses on graphics – any process begins with drawing objects and then applying programming to them through Flash's proprietary ActionScript language. Animation is made easy through tweening – Flash can automatically animate graphic objects between two keyframes. These features make it a lot more accessible for budding game designers. "It's a great tool, particularly in its ability to test ideas

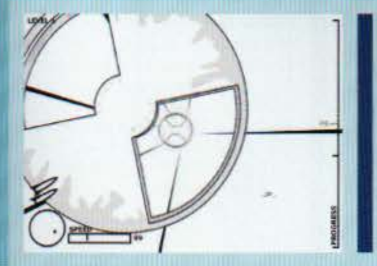
Wii access

Flash has proved to be a great backdoor into developing games and other applications for the Wii via its Opera web browser. Several independent teams have developed Flash-based APIs that harness the Wii Remote's specific functions, including Adam Robertson's Fwiidom project. Robertson says it has been surprisingly easy to develop for: "I can only assume Nintendo secretly hoped for, or were resigned to, this kind of hackery, as the use of standard Bluetooth and the lack of security make a refreshing change." WiiCade, the popular portal for Flash games made for playing through the Wii, provides an API that gives game makers access to the Wii Remote's buttons.



N was one of the first games to demonstrate Flash's affinity for physics simulations. This platformer's precise controls and fluid animation have become benchmarks for all that have followed

Missile 3D



DXInteractive

A perfect match for Wii Remote use, this fast tunnel-based obstacle course game dr:es out contact lenses like there's no tomorrow: blink and you've hit a wall. Great minimalist presentation, too.

Four Second Frenzy



jmtb02 Studios

A *WarioWare* clone that features 50 minigames developed by 26 different designers. The variety of contributor styles captures some of *WarioWare*'s schizophrenic charms and the pacing is compulsively fast, but minigame quality is variable.





These three games are different takes on Flash's knack for circles. L-R: *Boomshine* (a minimalist *Every Extend*), *Bubble Tanks* (*flOw* meets *Geometry Wars*) and *Red* (a physics-imbued *Missile Strike*)

quickly. It is a very visual tool for artists," says **John Baez** of The Behemoth, the studio that created *Alien Hominid* and the forthcoming *Castle Crashers*. "It just really makes you concentrate on the design and the content, and that's what Flash really stands for," agrees Cooper. It's hard to imagine games like Ferry Halim's Orisinal series on many other platforms.

Flash isn't for everyone, however. "There are a lot of limitations that come with its visual nature," says Greer. "Many traditional game programmers hate Flash because it doesn't work the way they think, but for many of the most creative people with an idea it does it very well." And it can do it fast, too. "They can have an idea, try it out and ship the game in a couple of weeks," he continues. And they can be sure that pretty much anyone will be able to run it, since most people have Flash installed. As Baez says, "Flash is the de facto standard for web-based animation," and Internet Explorer now comes loaded with it.

Flash's ubiquity and standardised form is part of the reason why it has left Shockwave, its sister media player, behind. Though Shockwave is arguably more suited to games, with a faster rendering engine and native 3D and network support, the common reality of playing Shockwave games is one of having to download external plugins, called Xtras, in order to get them to work.

But even Borne, who regards himself more a designer than a programmer, has issues with many elements of Flash's accessibility. "Flash really doesn't seem to be made for games," he says. He'd like to see it supporting hardware acceleration so games can run smoother, and finds the way web browsers limit available processing power to Flash frustrating, though he acknowledges this also protects users against power-hogging advertisements. He also feels that Flash 7 ran games faster than Flash 8 and even the latest version do, and that aspects of the latest version of ActionScript have moved towards more traditional programming. "It seems that they're moving Flash away from being the simple program to make silly little games and animations," he says.

"I don't agree that we're not focused on games – we are doing some things for them," counters **Richard Galvan**, Adobe's product manager for Flash games. "But it's not the only thing that we're doing. We have to make sure we support the other aspects of what Flash can do." Flash is an incredibly widely used application, after all. He says that Adobe is looking at ways of making it run faster, and that the changes in ActionScript 3 allow it to produce APIs like Papervision, a full 3D rendering engine which is built entirely in the language.

"I've rarely seen features from impressive tech demos make their way into real games," says

"If you can't render 100 tanks, you don't put them in – the challenge is to keep it fast and small"

Flash towers

A current Flash favourite is the tower defence game, a genre that exemplifies how the Flash game development community takes on ideas and refines them to give them new popularity. Tower defence games started as *WarCraft* and *StarCraft* mods and maps, including *WarCraft III*'s Element TD Survivor. Dave Scott produced a Flash version in January, called Flash Element TD, that generated 300,000 hits in its first five days. A torrent of clones have since been released, including Scott's own variants, but one of the best examples is Paul Preece's *Desktop Tower Defense*, which opens up new strategies by allowing free tower placement. It also features a lovely drawn graphic style and self-recorded sound effects.

Dynasty Street and *Stickman Sam 2* sustain Flash's love for the stickman, as made famous by Chinese Flash animator Zhu Zhiqiang and his Xiao Xiao series of interactive movies, which often parody Hong Kong film-making by exposing the stickmen to hyperviolence



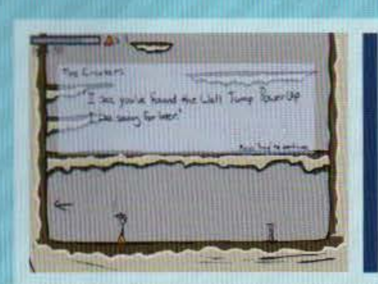
More Rooms



Sean Cooper

Technically impressive, with tens of smoothly animated boxy zombies attacking at once and weapons that upgrade nicely into a satisfyingly powerful arsenal. A combo scoring system and series of different arenas round off a full package.

Fancy Pants Adventure



Brad Borne

This excellent *Sonic*-like platformer features wonderfully fluid animation and a charming drawn graphic style. It also includes some amusing breaking-the-fourth-wall quips from 'The Creator' as abilities are unlocked or traps triggered.

Borne, however. But for Cooper, such limitations are part of the fun – he enjoys the challenge of creating certain effects and making it run as fast as possible. "When you have a game idea, you're influenced by the platform you're going on to," he says. "If you can't render 100 tanks, you don't put them in – the challenge for Flash is to keep it fast and small in size." And for him, it's these limitations that have given Flash its own aesthetic: the clean vectors and graded shading that typify its presentation and the simplicity of most games' design.

It means that people like West of Crazy Monkey Games are looking to sponsor gameplay over pretty graphics, much as Flash games are built around their visual components: "If someone sends in a game that's really fun to play we're always very interested in it, even if it's weak on graphics, sound, or other elements," he says. "If someone sends in a game with awesome graphics that's just not fun, well… there's not much we can do with that."

With such investment in design, Flash games have begun to find their own form and become less derivative of games on other formats. Certain ideas have sprung up and developed within the community, such as the tower defence game (see 'Flash towers'), and mouse-aiming shooter games. It's hard to define exactly where the mouse aiming idea first came from, but it gained much popularity from being used in late-2005 action platformer *Thing Thing*, in which the gun is aimed with mouse and character controlled via keyboard. *Stickman Sam* adds that perennial Flash favourite, the stickman, to the formula, and then the scheme is applied to one of the aiming options in *Bowmaster Prelude*, as well as the recently released *Luminara*, a *Geometry Wars*-style shooter. And to round it off, it's featured in top-down shooter *Endless Zombie Rampage* by Diseased Productions, which developed *Thing Thing* in the first place.

The speed at which new Flash games can be developed allows such design memes to quickly be explored across many different genres very quickly without the fear of economic failure that plagues commercial game production. "Not selling content allows for games that can explore novel dynamics which don't necessarily translate into a highly extended experience," says Jayisgames contributor **Patrick Dugan**.

But now there is more money in the scene, is there a danger that such experimentation might begin to be compromised? "The challenge that I see coming up for us is to keep the spirit of freedom and innovation intact as more money is poured into Flash games and the industry begins to become more mainstream," says West.

Jay Bibby of Jayisgames is not unduly concerned. "The spirit of freedom won't be lost as long as there remains a large audience to play and experience Flash games," he says. "As long as Adobe continues to push the Flash platform ahead, and as long as there is money to be made by getting your game sponsored, or by selling it to a Flash portal. These outlets reward creativity and innovation. The fact that the power to create engaging and compelling interactive experiences is in the hands of the masses ensures a steady stream of new ideas."

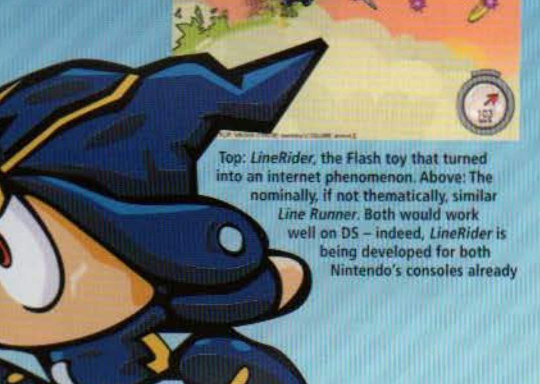






L-R: *Heli Attack*, a mouse-aiming side-scrolling shooter, *IndestructoTank!*, in which you use enemy attacks to blow your tank into the air for combos, and *Nutty McNuts*, a trajectory-based puzzle game





Top: *LineRider*, the Flash toy that turned into an internet phenomenon. Above: The nominally, if not thematically, similar *Line Runner*. Both would work well on DS – indeed, *LineRider* is being developed for both Nintendo's consoles already

Tri-achid



Florian Himsl and Edmund McMillen

A nice example of applying a game to the physics-based animals of the likes of Sodaplay, *Tri-achnid* is a game in which players must click and drag on the feet of their three-limbed beast to move around the levels. Unique stuff.

Sprout



Jeff Nusz

This visually lovely puzzle game about getting a tree seed off its lonely desert island and into a forest sometimes relies more on trial and error than logic, but the journey is rather enchanting all the same.




POWER
A
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WHO DARES WINS
Wii

Its 25-year history is characterised by an eagerness to take risks, and yet it is the world's most profitable game company. How does Nintendo do it?

The real Nintendo hallmark has never been the Seal Of Quality, or Mario's moustache, or Miyamoto's cheesy grin: ever since the launch of the NES it's been the yen. The one, unshakable constant in Nintendo's quarter-century of videogame production has been profit. In the decade after the launch of the company's first console, its share of the gaming market topped 90 per cent, and its profits rose inexorably to supply Game Over author David Sheff with his famous estimate that it earned £1 million for each and every employee. In 1993, when a slump took profits down to a still very handsome 23 per cent of sales, The Economist was startled enough to run editorial asking if it was the beginning of the end. For a modern perspective that seems ludicrous: it's hard to imagine how ecstatic Sony or Microsoft, both currently shouldering multi-million dollar losses, would be to be pocketing 23 per cent of their incomes. Nor has Nintendo's golden goose status diminished. Its latest annual financial results show a 77 per cent rise in profits – ¥74.3 billion (£310 million) from total revenue of ¥966.5 billion (£4 billion).

But there's another trend that's been consistent throughout Nintendo's videogame career, and it's one that goes in the opposite direction. After the 60 million-seller smash hit of the NES, Nintendo hardware sales have shrunk generation on generation: the SNES down to just shy of 50 million, the N64 to just over 30 million, and the GameCube only just topping 20 million. Even the world-conquering GBA has so far only been able to match about two thirds of the original Game Boy's 120 million. Software sales have slid down the same slope: 40 million copies of *Super Mario Bros* fell to just over 20 million for *Super Mario World*, down to 12 million for *Super Mario 64*, to just six million for *Super Mario Sunshine*. Nintendo may have been finding a way to keep its business in the black (mostly through the blindingly simple tactic of selling its hardware at a profit rather than a loss), but there was no disguising the collapse that it was facing if that trend continued.

And then came the DS. Its phenomenal success in Japan is already well documented.

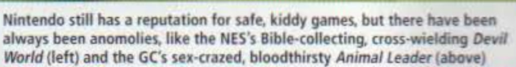
The biggest selling DS titles there – *New Super Mario Bros*, *Animal Crossing Wild World* and *More Brain Training* – have effortlessly outsold the traditional big hitters: more popular than *Tetris*, more popular than *Final Fantasy*, more popular than *Dragon Quest*. Only *Pokémon* has proven a bigger craze. Despite having already sold more than 17 million DSes, Nintendo is still selling around 150,000 units a week, more than all the other gaming systems combined, and 20 times more than the struggling PS3. Worldwide, the console may not be quite such a phenomenon, but it's still an emphatic success – in April,





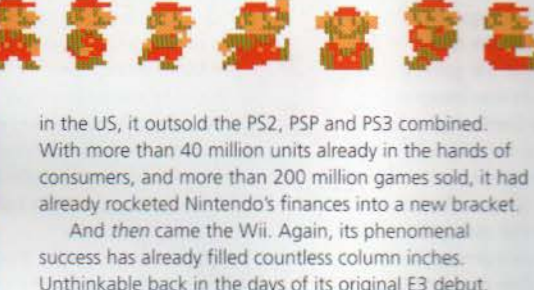


Nintendo still has a reputation for safe, kiddy games, but there have been always been anomolies, like the NES's Bible-collecting, cross-wielding *Devil World* (left) and the GC's sex-crazed, bloodthirsty *Animal Leader* (above)



25 YEARS YOUNG

So much of Nintendo's history has passed into gaming legend that it can be hard to get a perspective on how the company has evolved since it entered the videogame market. So, over the next few pages is a year-by-year summary of the company's history, picking out the key trends – some familiar, some now often forgotten. **Innovation** looks at the level of technological ambition – just what was the volume and quality of new ideas coming out of the company at any one time? **Software** examines the status of the games that Nintendo's internal teams, and some of their key first- and second-party partners were producing, and **Commercial** assesses the impact of that hardware and software on the company's market share and profitability. It's still a lot to take in, so good years and bad (and the ones in between) are marked out by traffic-light indicators. For a fuller history, there's still no better place to start than David Sheff's Game Over, and among the best online resources is Ken Polsson's Nintendo Timeline, which can be found via Google.



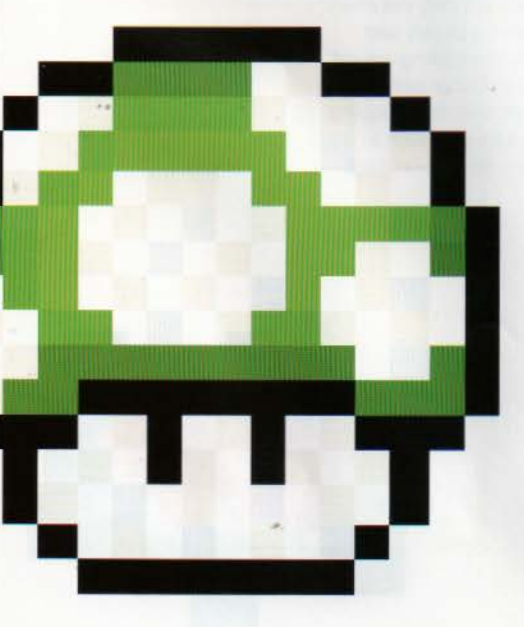
in the US, it outsold the PS2, PSP and PS3 combined. With more than 40 million units already in the hands of consumers, and more than 200 million games sold, it had already rocketed Nintendo's finances into a new bracket.

And *then* came the Wii. Again, its phenomenal success has already filled countless column inches. Unthinkable back in the days of its original E3 debut, when the most striking thing Nintendo could think to say about it was that it was the size of three DVD cases, and unthinkable still in the run-up to last year's E3 when the world was still tittering over the name, the Wii is effortlessly outpacing the 360 and PS3. For all its novelty, its rate of growth maps most closely to the sales curves of PS2 and GBA, the two mainstream powerhouses of the modern gaming world. The result, despite the cost of developing and launching two consoles in two years, is that 77 per cent jump in profits, and every chance – if sales trends continue as they have been – that Nintendo will retake first place in home console market share, something it hasn't enjoyed since the SNES, and hasn't had with any level of dominance since the NES.

But while the ultimate success of the Wii still faces enormous questions (will the quality and range of software support improve beyond its current, disappointing standards? Will the new demographic buying the machine tire of its novelties in a few months and retire it to the cupboard?), its initial success has already changed everything from Nintendo. Alongside the unspoken videogame law that no one manufacturer can dominate three generations is another: that big companies don't make big comebacks. Despite efforts to re-badge and re-use their names, companies like Commodore and Atari were never able to reclaim their glory days. But with the possible exception of Activision's resurrection after its near-collapse in 1992, Nintendo stands alone in its reassertion of its former dominance. And that dominance is over a much larger market than the one that the NES made its own.

So what are the implications of this renaissance for Nintendo? Is it a return to form, or a dawning of a significantly different age? What explains the doldrums the company faced as sales crashed even as profits survived? The company has always known how to make money, and it's always known how to make great games, but just what is the alchemy that turns those to factors into global dominance, as it once did with the NES, long managed with the Game Boy, and has succeeded in again with the vision behind DS and Wii?

The simple fact is that, when faced with decline, Nintendo's response has always been to risk it, to innovate. When, after the second world war, Nintendo president Hiroshi Yamauchi realised that the traditional Japanese and western-style playing cards that the company manufactured were losing their appeal, he adapted both the technology and the approach of the company, pioneering a plasticised production method, and signing a hugely successful licensing deal to use Disney characters on Nintendo's cards. Other, famously failed experiments followed, from love hotels to portions of instant rice, as Yamauchi sought to safeguard Nintendo by diversifying its products. But in the end – perhaps in no small measure thanks to the Disney deal – one factor won out: children. In the early years of the century Nintendo's handmade hanafuda cards were a product aimed at adults. Fifty years later, and Yamauchi saw that the company's greatest strength was effective distribution channels to a younger market, and the direction of



1983



INNOVATION
Nintendo graduates from lightguns and Game & Watches with its first home console, the Famicom, which will go on to become a design classic, and which Nintendo will support for more than two decades.

SOFTWARE
Donkey Kong (above) takes Mario from the arcades into the home in his original adventure, and Nintendo launches his private enterprise with the arrival of *Mario Bros*, which will become a cornerstone of the company.

COMMERCIAL
The Famicom sells half a million in just two months, paving the way for the massive growth to follow. Although not a stellar initial performance, the success of the NES effectively builds the Japanese home gaming market.

1984



INNOVATION
Alongside familiar lightgun tech in the Zapper, Nintendo introduces the Famicom robot (called R.O.B in the US), which emphasises the Famicom's identity as a home computer rather than a games machine.

SOFTWARE
The NES's early years are distinguished with arcade clones and simple, representative games whose names act as genre definitions as well as complete descriptions, like *Golf*, *F1 Race*, *Pinball* and *Tennis* (above).

COMMERCIAL
Strong sales of the Famicom in Japan are interrupted by reports of the console freezing up on certain games. The failure is traced back the hardware, and Yamauchi takes the hard, but far-sighted, decision to recall all units.

1985



INNOVATION
With the Famicom now well established in Japan, and dollars rolling in from the success of the *Donkey Kong* arcade machine, Nintendo redesigns the casing of its Famicom to suit the new market, and renames it the NES.

SOFTWARE
Mario is already a star, but the arrival of *Super Mario Bros* (above) catapults him, and the NES, into a new league. Bundled with the hardware, it remains the best-selling game of all time, topping more than 40 million copies.

COMMERCIAL
While the US is initially sceptical of the NES, with memories of the recent console crash all too painful, Japan has enthusiastically embraced the Famicom, buying 6.5 million units of the console in the two years since its launch.

1986



INNOVATION
Nintendo takes the first of many bold leaps with the Famicom Disk System. Cheaper than cartridges, and rewritable, the disks could be plugged in at kiosks to download cut-price games, until publishers rebelled.

SOFTWARE
Four years on, the Famicom begins a golden age, playing host to franchises which will support Nintendo for decades to come, like *Metroid* and *The Legend Of Zelda* (above), which relies on the Disk System to save.

COMMERCIAL
As the US enthusiasm for home gaming machines is restored, the NES starts to sell as successfully as the Famicom had in Japan. By the end of 1986, Nintendo has sold over a million of its new consoles, and dominates US gaming.

1987



INNOVATION
With the Disk System eclipsed by carts with battery saves, a fledgling Nintendo Of America takes the lead by announcing the Hands Free controller, which allows disabled players to play nearly all available NES games.

SOFTWARE
Incurring the wrath of many new fans, Nintendo releases the side-scrolling sequel to *The Legend Of Zelda*, but earns the enthusiasm of many new ones with the arrival of *Punch Out!!* (above), endorsed by Mike Tyson in the US.

COMMERCIAL
US NES sales accelerate to over four million, which combined with Japanese sales take the company to a 70 per cent market share, dwarfing efforts by rival Sega, whose recently launched Master System is failing to win through.

1988

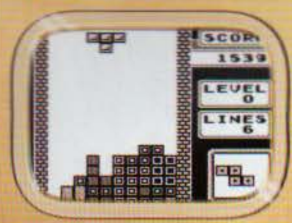


INNOVATION
Long before Konami sees its potential for humiliating and exhausting arcade-goers, Nintendo launches its own dance mat, the Power Pad. Designed initially for fitness games, it doesn't prove a success.

SOFTWARE
While the original *Super Mario Bros* cheated its way into the record books by being bundled, *SMB3* (above), hits new heights fuelled by franchise fame alone. Also born this year is the *Famicom (Advance) Wars* series.

COMMERCIAL
High-profile games mean that the NES enjoyed another stellar year in the US, selling around seven million units. Despite being five years old, it is showing no signs of flagging, and won't be discontinued until 1995.

1989



INNOVATION
Gumpei Yokoi, who had moved the company into toys with the Ultra Hand, and into electronics with the Beam Gun, propels Nintendo into handhelds with the Game Boy, which will dominate portable gaming for decades.

SOFTWARE
The tale of Nintendo's acquisition of the *Tetris* (above) rights is one of the best known gaming legends. Ultimately selling more than 30m units, often bundled with the console, it is worth every penny Nintendo pays for it.

COMMERCIAL
NES sales in the US continue to accelerate, coming close to 10 million, and Japan is quick to fall for the Game Boy, buying a million within the first year. Between them, the machines take Nintendo to an 80 per cent market share.

1990



INNOVATION
Having lost the 8bit war, Nintendo's competitors had turned to the next generation, pushing Nintendo to release the Super Famicom to see off the threat of the Sega Mega Drive and the PC Engine/TurboGrafx-16.

SOFTWARE
The Super Famicom needs a high-profile launch title to demonstrate why people should upgrade from the still-thriving NES, and it gets it in the shape of *Super Mario World*, which will go on to sell 20 million copies.

COMMERCIAL
With the NES still performing strongly, *Tetris* fever fuelling the Game Boy and the Super Famicom so popular that yakuza gangs are said to be planning to hijack shipments, Nintendo owns 90 per cent of the market.

1991



INNOVATION

After years of behind-the-scenes wranglings with Sony to develop a CD-ROM drive for the Super Famicom, Nintendo instead makes the surprise announcement of a deal with Phillips instead. Years more wrangling will follow.

SOFTWARE

The SNES is home to one of Nintendo's strongest software line-ups, and its crown jewels come early. Exactly a year after the arrival of *SMW* comes *A Link To The Past* (above), cementing *Zelda*'s status as a system seller.

COMMERCIAL

Although the SNES enjoys a hugely successful Japanese launch, and despite sales of over eight million Game Boys, strong competition from Sega takes Nintendo's market share down to 70 per cent, a substantial decline.

1992



INNOVATION

Still embroiled in disputes regarding a CD-ROM add-on for the SNES, Nintendo eventually announces that the deal with Sony is back on to produce a machine which will play both cartridge and CD-based games.

SOFTWARE

Nintendo's magic touch continues, with *ALTTP* receiving a rapturous response in the US, *Mario Paint* reshaping gamers' expectations of home console software, and *Super Mario Kart* (above) claiming its first generation.

COMMERCIAL

Nintendo emerges from years of price-fixing allegations and court action with Atari and Tengen unscathed, but the decline – despite total SNES sales of nearly 18 million – continues, bringing its market share down to 52 per cent.

1993



INNOVATION

With Nintendo's attention distracted by CD-ROM projects, it falls to British team Argonaut to advance the company's technology with the Super FX chip, which improves the SNES's graphics-handling capabilities.

SOFTWARE

The Super FX chip debuts in *Star Fox* (above), adding to Nintendo's franchise roster, but this release masks an otherwise lacklustre year for Nintendo's software divisions, which musters only the likes of *Super Punch Out.*

COMMERCIAL

Nintendo's cultural kudos is high, as demonstrated by the release of the Super Mario Bros film, but the SNES struggles to hold its own against the Mega Drive, leaving Nintendo with barely half of the games market.

1994



INNOVATION

Abandoning plans for a CD-based machine, Nintendo commits to producing a new cartridge-based machine – Project Reality – which will become the N64. Also announced is the doomed 3D system, the Virtual Boy.

SOFTWARE

The British are once again almost singlehandedly driving Nintendo's reputation, as Rare releases *Donkey Kong Country*, but Nintendo's teams hold the initiative with the enduringly excellent *Super Metroid* (above).

COMMERCIAL

The 16bit console battle begins to stabilise, with Nintendo regaining 57 per cent of the market. Game Boy sales are holding steady, closing on 40 million sales since its launch five years previously.

1995



INNOVATION

Keen to capitalise on the enormous domestic success of the SNES, Nintendo announces the Satellaview satellite modem add-on, which allows players to download games, quizzes and news. It broadcasts until 2000.

SOFTWARE

Back in the groove, Nintendo releases *Yoshi's Island* (above), a radical sequel to *Super Mario World* whose anarchic gameworld and illustration-style visuals win it loyal fans but less dramatic total sales of just over four million.

COMMERCIAL

Trading becomes tough for Nintendo, as the Virtual Boy proves a failure in both Japan and the US (it will be canned the following year). Game Boy sales also start to dip, although its popularity remains high.

1996



INNOVATION

With Sony's PlayStation breaking records and claiming headlines, Nintendo puts its faith in superior firepower with the release of the N64. Its analogue stick and 3D capabilities usher in a new era of game design.

SOFTWARE

Alongside the N64 comes its key launch title, *Super Mario 64* (above), which changes gamers' expectations of 3D movement forever. But it's important not to overlook the year's other key release – *Pokémon Red/Green*.

COMMERCIAL

The N64 looks initially set to repeat the SNES's success, selling close to 500,000 units in its first week of both US and Japanese release, and breaking all US console sales records. *Pokémon* fuels a Game Boy resurgence.

1997



INNOVATION

With its entry in the home console market established, Nintendo turns its attention to the Game Boy, releasing the first of many revisions in the dinkier form of the Game Boy Pocket, which features a better display.

SOFTWARE

Nintendo's big release for '97 is *Star Fox 64* (aka *Lylat Wars*, above), which features dizzying 3D environments and terrific audio. Its thunder is thoroughly stolen in the west, however, by the arrival of Rare's *GoldenEye*.

COMMERCIAL

Despite its strong start, N64 sales drop off at a worrying rate, and Nintendo soon announces price drops for both the US and Japan. But the Game Boy remains in strong shape, thanks to new hardware and Pokémania.

1998



INNOVATION

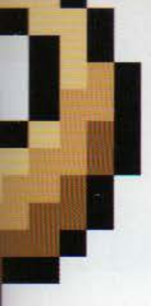
Still focusing on the Game Boy, Nintendo announces the Game Boy Colour, which improves on the original in almost all respects, alongside inventive add-ons like the forward-thinking Game Boy Camera and Printer.

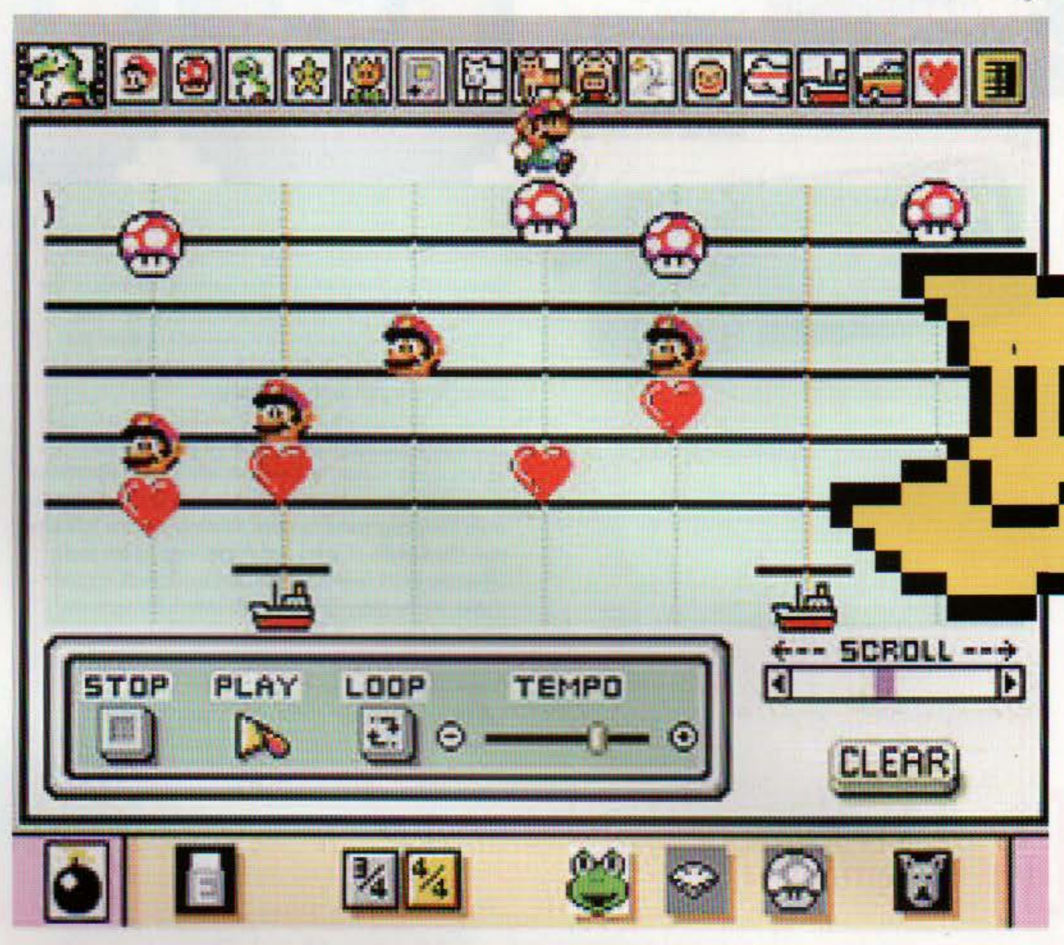
SOFTWARE

Eclipsing all other releases is the return of Link in *Ocarina Of Time* (above), which remains for many the defining N64 title. Excelling in its gameplay and innovating in its use of rumble and control schemes, it deserves its plaudits.

COMMERCIAL

Despite the costs of the N64, Game Boy Pocket and Game Boy Colour launches, Nintendo's profits are riding high at over $600 million dollars, helped in no small measure by the arrival of *Pokémon* in the US market.





Nintendo's future was set: toys. After the success of experiments like young engineer Gumpei Yokoi's Ultra Hand (a simple extendable clamp) and Ultra Machine (an automatic softball launcher), the scene was set for the next crucial Nintendo risk: the creation of Japan's first electronic children's toy, the Kousenjuu lightgun series.

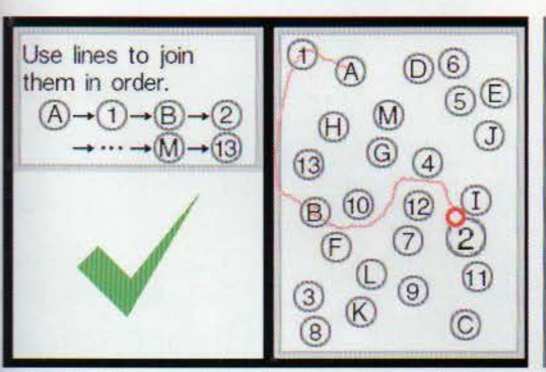
It's these two factors – innovation and kid-appeal – that have remained at the core of Nintendo's philosophy. Miyamoto was himself quick to credit them during his GDC keynote on the core of his own creative vision, citing risk-taking and a focus on the happy faces of his eventual audience as key elements in his approach. And, although that assumption that Nintendo is for children may raise howls of frustration from dedicated grown-up fans, it's a crucial point. Neither the existence of truly adult games, like *Conker's Bad Fur Day* or *Eternal Darkness*, nor the fact that the appeal of Nintendo's best creations transcends the generation gap, contradict it: whatever their real age, there's no doubt that Nintendo perceives its audience to be childlike. Whether five or 50, Nintendo thinks of its gamers as playful, curious, eager to be delighted, ready to laugh. It's not how Rockstar, Epic or Bungie would ever describe their target audience.

But if these two factors are the key to the company's good fortune, did Nintendo's doldrums coincide with a failure to focus strongly enough on those principles, or is there more to the secret of Nintendo's success? There's no doubt its risk-taking has been as much miss as hit. For every DS there's a Virtual Boy, for every D-pad there's a 64DD. There were ahead-of-their-time failures, like the SNES's Satellaview download service. There were overly cumbersome failures, like the GameCube's e-Reader. There were people-just-aren't-that-interested failures, like the N64's ground-breaking voice-controlled *Hey You! Pikachu*. But what those failures demonstrate is Nintendo's other key attribute: tenacity. Nintendo isn't fazed by its failures. There's very little hand-wringing, very little self-recrimination. It's partly down to Nintendo's famously frugal R&D budgets, which mean the investment in each new project isn't too overwhelming, and it's partly down to the company's refusal to sell at a loss, meaning that even a poor sales performance helps rake back cash, rather than deepening the loss. But it's partly a simple, cultural choice. Miyamoto singled it out as another key Nintendo trait in his GDC keynote, but it

The SNES's *Mario Paint* (above) and the ill-fated *Mario Artist* suite (below) for the 64DD are other perfect examples of Nintendo's long non-gaming design heritage. Surely a DS reinvention can't be that far off?

Whether five or 50, Nintendo thinks of its gamers as playful, curious, eager to be delighted, ready to laugh. It's not how Rockstar, Epic or Bungie would ever describe their target audience



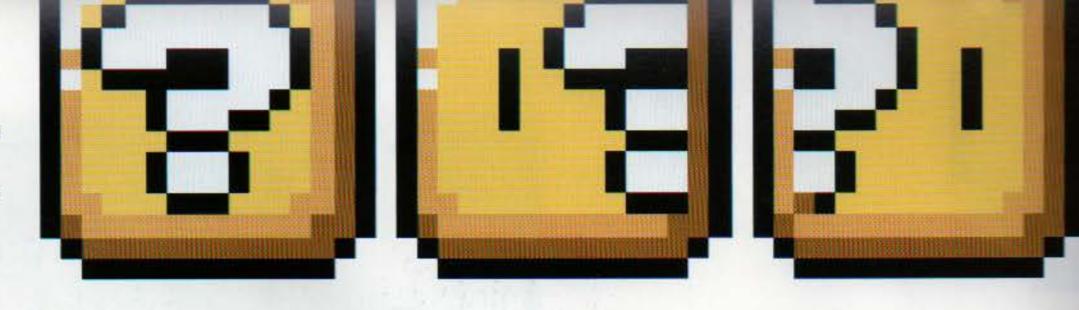




Brain Training (left) was seen by many to mark a departure for Nintendo's software design teams, but the company's initial vision for the Famicom always assumed that a gaming machine ought to be able to make its users think as well as letting them enjoy themselves, as could be seen in the decision to release a version of BASIC (right), alongside a chunky red-and-white keyboard and a compatible tape drive to store the programs you had written







The Famicom's original red and gold design (as opposed to the NES's chunky charm) is still iconic, and is kept alive in retro-styled devices, like the commemorative Game Boy Micro (below)



dates back to Yamauchi's initial attempts to refocus the company. His initial failures and enormous eventual success must have taught him a valuable lesson: that getting it right first time is much less important than being able to outlive your mistakes.

It's easy to identify the times when Nintendo's technical innovation, software excellence and commercial appeal have come together. The launch of the Game Boy/ *Tetris* pack may come quickest to mind, but the following year (the launch of SNES and *PilotWings*, which took Nintendo to an overall 90 per cent worldwide market share), or the glory days of 1998 (which brought the arrival of *Ocarina Of Time*, alongside the redesigned Game Boy Color – itself reinvigorated with the innovative Game Boy Camera and Printer and accompanied, in the US, by the first wave of the *Pokémon* invasion) are all good examples of the Nintendo plan coming together. And it's possible to track the low points, like 1993, when Nintendo's main technological push was dependent on a bunch of upstart Brits (in the shape of the Super FX chip) and when the SNES was first eclipsed (in shipment figures, at least) by the Mega Drive. Or a decade later when, facing the PS2's 70 per cent market share, Nintendo had to temporarily halt GameCube production, and could muster little better than *Kirby's Air Ride* and *Mario Kart Double Dash* to distract from its failures.

But rather than explaining that overall decline in dominance, these fluctuations are caused mostly by the natural lifecycles of the company's hardware. There's a pressure wave of success which pushes through the three real pillars of Nintendo's business – technical innovation, commercial success, software excellence – as each generation evolves. So, at the close of one generation, innovation is flatlined and profits are falling as a result of the R&D costs for the new machine, while software excellence peaks as designers finally master the full potential of existing hardware. Then, as the new kit launches, the company's innovation stock soars, but software quality and profitability dive as they always do when a new machine debuts. Then the wave moves on to

Facing the PS2's 70 per cent market share, Nintendo had to temporarily halt GameCube production, and could muster little better than Kirby's Air Ride and Mario Kart Double Dash to distract from its failures



1999



INNOVATION
Just as with the Famicom Disk System and the SNES Satellaview, Nintendo had long planned to augment the N64 with the 64DD disk drive add-on. After four years of delays, it launches in 1999, with no hint of success.

SOFTWARE
Adjusting to its role as the gamer's game company, Nintendo releases *Super Smash Bros*, which combines franchise nostalgia, multiplayer entertainment and hardcore appeal to enormous acclaim, particularly in the US.

COMMERCIAL
The decline of the N64 has continued, dropping Nintendo's market share to around 25 per cent as PlayStation claims the majority of the market. Continued Pokémania helps keep profits holding steady at $645 million.

2000



INNOVATION
Accepting the demise of the cart (as well, perhaps, as the disappointing performance of the four-year-old N64), Nintendo announces the disk-based GameCube system, codenamed Project Dolphin.

SOFTWARE
The N64 enters its twilight years with the masterful *Majora's Mask*. That great rarity – a second *Zelda* title on the same system – its melancholy tone and startling gameplay innovations mean it meets with a mixed response.

COMMERCIAL
Pokémania abates, the N64 feels its age, and Nintendo's profits dip closer to $400 million. As Howard Lincoln, chairman of NOA and architect of many of Nintendo's coups, retires, it feels like the end of an era.

2001



INNOVATION
Rousing itself from its failings, and increasingly under the influence of future president Satoru Iwata, Nintendo releases the GameCube alongside the next-generation Game Boy, the Game Boy Advance.

SOFTWARE
The GC launch line-up proves underwhelming, despite strong affection for *Luigi's Mansion* (above). However, its update to N64 experiment *Animal Forest* (above – aka *Crossing* in the west) points the way forward.

COMMERCIAL
The GameCube worryingly under performs the N64 in Japan, and results in the US don't prove more encouraging. The GBA, however, is a tearaway success, shifting 600,000 units in its first week, and boosting profits to $726 million.

2002



INNOVATION
The double release of GBA and GC seems to take the wind out of Nintendo's technological sales, meaning 2002 is notable for little more than the ill-fated e- Reader, and the GameCube-compatible GBA player and network adapter.

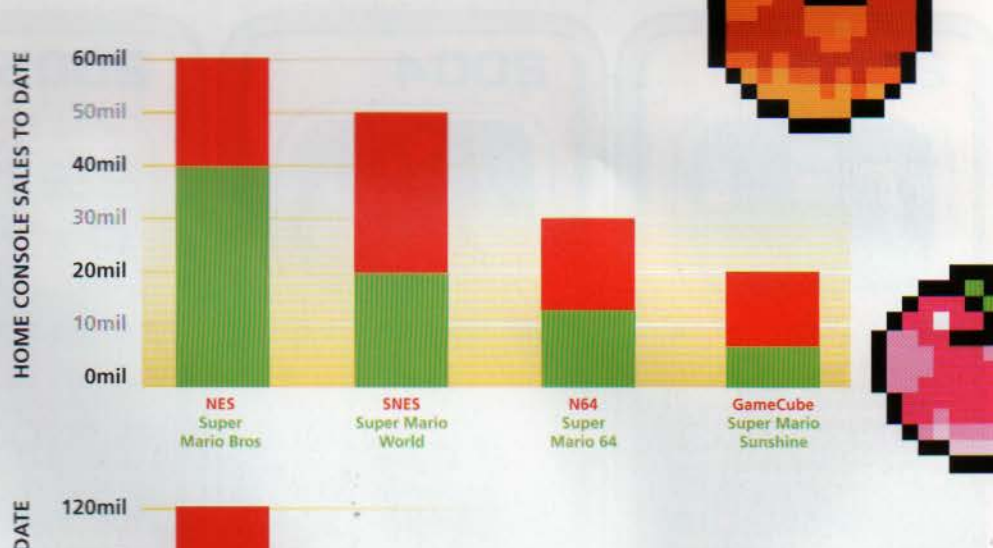
SOFTWARE
Having courted controversy by releasing the GC without a Mario game, Nintendo fills the hole with *Super Mario Sunshine*. Concerns about fiddly camera control and repetitive tasks undermine its breezy appeal.

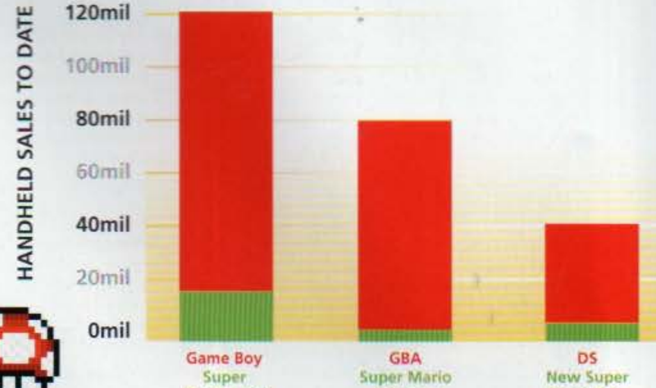
COMMERCIAL
GameCube sales remain unspectacular, and are thoroughly eclipsed by the PS2. Nintendo cuts prices in the US by 25 per cent, but despite this, and a European Union fine of $147 million for price fixing, profits remain high.

the commercial field, as cash flows in from the new machine and, finally, as the console matures, it reaches the software again.

So, against that natural ebb and flow, what has allowed Nintendo to reverse the deeply rooted pattern of decline? What has allowed the Wii to sell nearly twice as fast as the GC or N64? The answer may be much simpler than expected: just as Nintendo has said all along, it's tried to turn back the clock. It's easy to dismiss the principle of Touch! Generations – of trying to level the playing field between veteran gamers and newcomers – as press-release hyperbole, but the Wii and the DS are much closer to the mentality behind the NES than they are to the thinking that dominated the SNES, N64, and GC. In the middle of Nintendo's evolution, it had come to think of itself very aggressively as a game company. In the face of Sony's multimedia pretensions, it defined itself by making machines that were purely for gaming, and software that was purely for purists. Miyamoto had cemented his status as the gamer's game designer, and loyal Nintendo fans were proud to champion a machine which championed their hobby. But, while this approach guaranteed the company profits, it also limited its growth. The names tell the story: the N64 sold itself to gamers on the promise of its processing power. The GameCube wore its hardcore credentials on its sleeve as well as its nametag. But go back to Nintendo's beginnings and you don't find gamers – you find a family computer, an entertainment system.

The Famicom, rebadged the Nintendo Entertainment System for the US, ran BASIC, offered a tape drive, and had a modem via which news, weather and stock reports could be downloaded. It offered, through the Famicom Disk System, a way to download (albeit physically at







The long-running *Pokémon* series, though often underestimated, has been a pillar in Nintendo's fortunes

kiosks) cheaper games. Peripherals both old, like the Zapper, and new, like the Power Pad (which we'd now call a dance mat), gave those put off by the abstractions of the joypad an intuitive way to interact with the machine. It was a console designed for the living room (long before the PlayStation revolution supposedly reclaimed the front room as gaming territory), for communal use – "Your parents help you hook it up!" reassures the avuncular voiceover at the end of the excruciating US TV advert for *The Legend Of Zelda*, demonstrating that this was technology intended to bring the family together, not give it reasons to play apart. Looked at from the right angle, the notoriously innovative Wii looks far more like a conservative stablemate to Nintendo's most successful home console.

So does that mean that Nintendo is destined to repeat that success? Will the Wii sell 60 million units and help the company reclaim a 90 per cent market share? The lazy answer is to say that it's too soon to tell, but the real answer is simpler: it can't. A quarter century of gaming evolution has produced an enlarged and diversified demographic, a much larger target to aim at, but one whose attention is much more hotly contested, by websites, podcasts and YouTube as well as by games that run on their phones, their browsers and their set-top boxes. So the irony for Nintendo is that even if it sells more Wiis than it did NESes, even if it doubles the money it was making in the '80s, it will still almost certainly fail to achieve the dominance it had, back when playing Nintendo was synonymous with playing games. It means that Nintendo's new-found success is doomed in some respect to failure: if the Wii does turn out to be a short-lived fad, then Nintendo doesn't get to dominate. But if the Wii



2003

INNOVATION
Nintendo responds to almost universal criticism of the GBA's unlit screen (and the release of Triton Labs' Afterburner front-light kit) by announcing the SP, a clamshell unit with a rechargeable battery and brighter screen.

SOFTWARE
Another hint of Nintendo's future direction comes in the debut of the original *WarioWare*, but its mainstream GC software falters with the release of *Kirby's Air Ride*, and the disappointing *Mario Kart: Double Dash* (above).

COMMERCIAL
Despite cutting GameCube prices to $99, the console continues to flounder, claiming only 16 per cent of the market compared to PS2's 70 per cent dominance. Nintendo halts production for a few months to allow stockpiles to clear.

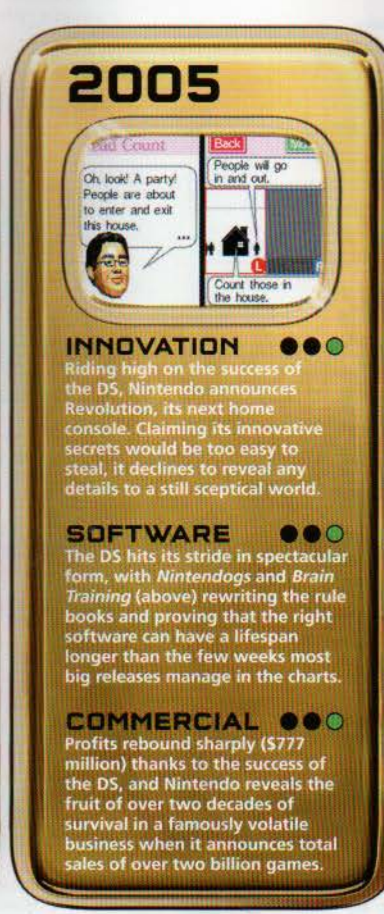


2004

INNOVATION
No doubt the product of some painful conversations over the previous year, Nintendo unveils its grand new risk: the DS. Its clumsy looks, twin screens and touch input are greeted with suspicion, but soon win converts.

SOFTWARE
Nintendo desperately needs innovative software to communicate the DS's peculiar advantages, but successes like *Band Bros* are overshadowed by conversions and fudges like *Super Mario 64 DS* (above).

COMMERCIAL
Profits fall to the lowest in Nintendo's recent history ($316 million), but signs are positive as the SP's strong sales continue, and the DS (which debuts in the US), confounds critics by selling millions in its first few weeks.



2005

INNOVATION
Riding high on the success of the DS, Nintendo announces Revolution, its next home console. Claiming its innovative secrets would be too easy to steal, it declines to reveal any details to a still sceptical world.

SOFTWARE
The DS hits its stride in spectacular form, with *Nintendogs* and *Brain Training* (above) rewriting the rule books and proving that the right software can have a lifespan longer than the few weeks most big releases manage in the charts.

COMMERCIAL
Profits rebound sharply ($777 million) thanks to the success of the DS, and Nintendo reveals the fruit of over two decades of survival in a famously volatile business when it announces total sales of over two billion games.



2006

INNOVATION
The Wii debuts at E3, and silences doubters with the sensitivity and immediacy of its controller. Later in the year, the introduction of the Virtual Console and Wii Channels proves that its software innovation is just as strong.

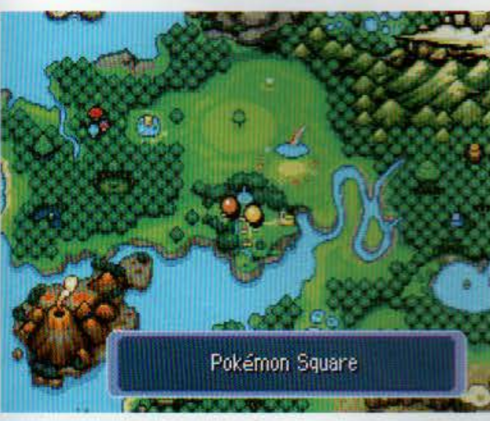
SOFTWARE
It's hard to think of a more emblematic title than *New Super Mario Bros*, marrying Nintendo's hardcore and casual appeal, and reversing the decline of the series' sales in dramatic form, doubling *Mario Sunshine*'s sales.

COMMERCIAL
Profits jump yet again, beating all forecasts as demand for games for the DS Lite exhausts Nintendo's plastic supplies, forcing a swap to cardboard cases, and Wii shipments sell out within hours of delivery around the world.


Home console versions of the *Pokémon* games have always been oddly lacklustre, even if sales have been strong. The Wii's *Pokémon Battle Revolution* doesn't quite buck the trend, despite its wifi innovations

continues to be a runaway success, and revolutionises the overall gaming audience, then Nintendo still won't dominate, as the new market will simply be too big and too diverse for one company to control.

But perhaps one of Nintendo's most important hallmarks is that it's never really been very interested in console wars. At a time when two huge companies, Microsoft and Sony, are waging a brand war, a massively subsidised campaign to win mindshare and gain a strategic upper hand in the multimedia entertainment space, Nintendo has no interest in such woolly-headed marketing speak. Instead, it continues to steer by its twin guiding lights, one ruthless, one altruistic. It's the Nintendo philosophy in a nutshell, and seems guaranteed to see the company safe through another quarter decade of gaming: will it makes us money, and will it make you smile?





Nintendo has been more modest in its exploitation of the Pokémon brand than it has with its Mario-related games. Spinoffs like *Pokémon Ranger* are still relatively rare



Takashi Tezuka

An insider's look at Nintendo with the man who started out on *SMB* and has worked on every *Mario* and *Zelda* since

How is the atmosphere inside Nintendo at the moment? How does it compare to the atmosphere 20 years ago, when the NES was so successful with mainstream gamers?
When I make a videogame, I have always been trying to feel the flux of time. We – the development staff members – have always been trying to create videogames that can be an indicator of the new wave of entertainment, and that attitude has not changed in the last 20 years. As the entire videogame industry grew, the sheer number of staff members needed to create a videogame also had to increase. We are now required to take care of a variety of different genres of software as efficiently as possible. Specifically, how we are making software has changed, so that, in most cases, we have some people dedicated to working on certain aspects of the entire work, instead of a few people working on the whole project.

Do you feel that Nintendo is returning to its gaming roots with Wii and DS?
Actually, I don't feel that Nintendo has ever deviated from its gaming roots. The style of expression has changed, but I feel the substance of entertainment that we try to provide has not changed significantly.

Of course, interests vary depending on which country, territory or time people live in. We always try to create some pleasant surprises, but how we can surprise people changes too, accordingly. We're always trying to pay close attention to the flux of time, but what doesn't change is that we're always trying to create brand new entertainment that can give pleasant surprises to people.

The hardware of Wii and DS have been designed so that they can encourage and inspire game creators to create brand new entertainment that does not necessarily exist as a linear extension of the past stream of videogame evolutions. As a result, though some of the games may make you feel that they have returned to their origins, in reality we have been able to create brand new genres of videogames. Wii, for example, has so far been able to generate a new wave by enabling more physical experiences instead of just aiming at the increasingly gorgeously looking graphics and beautiful sounds, I think.

How does designing games now compare with how you approached it 20 years ago? Are you consciously trying to think in the same way now as then, to appeal to the same kind of non-hardcore gamers? Or have things changed too much since then?
I have not significantly altered the way I design games. As a matter of fact, I have never consciously separated casual users and hardcore gamers when I design a game. For the past 20 years, I have always been trying to make games so that anyone – as many people as possible – can enjoy them.

How have working practices changed since the GameCube days, when larger teams were working on bigger, more elaborate projects?
Depending on the software, sometimes the total number of staff members is less than the ones needed for a GameCube game, and sometimes more people are required to work on a Wii game. Of course, we have been increasing our production knowhow so, even when the total number of people involved is smaller, the total work volume may be bigger.

I'm afraid my answer is a little unspectacular, but we are emphasising the smoother communications and constructions of more efficient office working environments including development tools, on an ongoing basis. These down-to-Earth efforts always pay off.

Do you feel under more or less pressure now that the DS and Wii have been such a huge success?
I must say that I always feel the same level of pressure. Before, it was the pressure that we must successfully launch DS and Wii and create the momentum. Now, we are under the pressure that we must maintain it and expand it. Having said that, however, I cannot help but say that I love my job of making games from the bottom of my heart!





final frontiers

As the 20th anniversary of Square's monster RPG series approaches, we take a careful look at what is happening to the Final Fantasy legend

It can be hard to separate fantasy and reality. There's a great story about a development studio on the financial brink, its star director ready to call his current game his last, throwing everything they had left at a fantastical plot. They would go out with all guns blazing, and a starkly defiant name: Square Co and Hironobu Sakaguchi's farewell to the videogame industry would be a *Final Fantasy*.

But things worked out differently. The previous year, Enix's *Dragon Quest* had turned the Japanese appetite for RPGs into a craving, and *Final Fantasy* entered this market and sold its first units on December 18, 1987. Two decades later, the *Final Fantasy* name has sold over 70 million units worldwide – making it the fourth largest videogame franchise in history – and is now not so much a game series as a worldwide multimedia project encompassing games, films, books, anime and limitless merchandise from action figures to soundtracks.

On occasion, it has overreached itself. The huge investment in the CGI film Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within saw the collapse of Square Pictures when it bombed, and necessitated drastic action: a merger. But it was appropriate that, of all the possible partners, Squaresoft and the Enix Corporation combined in 2003 to form Square Enix, the company now responsible for several of the biggest roleplaying licences in videogames. The first thing you see upon entering the company's Tokyo headquarters, among the chairs with their cushions shaped like slimes and chocobos, is a proudly displayed and framed map of Vana'diel, the online world of *Final Fantasy XI* populated by half a million players. Like the series it is huge, intricate and beautiful, a marvellous sight to present to visitors – but like the series it is also slightly overblown and, on closer inspection, consists of several different sections pulled together to create an illusion of coherence.

The latest in the *FF* series exemplifies this, the first in the core series to be developed concurrently with its spinoff games,

Cloud and Sephiroth in the new cut of Advent Children Complete

collectively known as the Final Fantasy XIII: Fabula Nova Crystallis project, and consisting of *FFXIII* plus *FF Versus XIII* and *FF Agito XIII*. As this intense development continues, the series is more diverse than ever, with spinoffs of spinoffs threatening to leave even the die-hard fan reeling (see 'The final countdown'). There are currently over 15 *FF* titles either forthcoming or recently released, on formats ranging from PS3 to mobile phones: a number that applied to, say, *Mario* games, would make even Nintendo blush. At the Square Enix Party 2007 a pamphlet detailing all titles in development was distributed: some beermat maths showed that approximately 65 per cent of the company's upcoming games bear the *Final Fantasy* name. At the moment, there's certainly the demand, but is Square Enix over-extending itself, and over-saturating its own market? And is *Final Fantasy* even a coherent concept for a series any more, or simply an umbrella term that is more of a trademark than an indication of content?

The starting point for any consideration of *Final Fantasy* has to be an acknowledgement of its past importance and consistent excellence in several respects, from the soundtracks of Nobuo Uematsu (featuring leitmotifs for individual characters and overarching themes) to FMV sequences that set new standards on their platforms. Ever since the original NES games, *Final Fantasy's* visual excellence has been such a given that it is easy to be blasé about its achievements, from the adoption of Mode 7 graphics by *FFIV* to the astonishing *FFXII*. And although there are inevitably poorer titles in the series, the overall standard is such that there is arguably no other RPG series of comparable quantity and depth to the *Final Fantasy* core titles. Indeed, this range can often make pretenders to the blockbuster RPG throne seem positively anaemic. It's not confined to offline RPGs either: one of Squaresoft's bravest decisions was to enter into the fledgling MMO market with *FFXI*, and, as of June 2007, few other MMOs can claim to be thriving five

The final countdown

There is a bewildering number of *Final Fantasy* titles in development, from all-new titles to remakes of remakes. For those who confuse chocobos with moogles, or tactics with an International Zodiac Jobsystem, here's a guide.

Final Fantasy XIII
(PS3) Release: **TBA**

The centrepiece of *Fabula Nova Crystallis* and the latest in the sequence of core titles, *XIII* features that central series' first female protagonist, Lightning, and a futuristic setting dominated by the division between the privileged citizens of Cocoon (a floating fortress) and those on Pulse, the planet below. The sequences shown thus far are breathtaking in visual quality, but little solid gameplay information is known



Final Fantasy Versus XIII
(PS3) Release: **TBA**

The counterpoint to *FFXIII*, *Versus* promises to be much more action-oriented and a darker look at the *Final Fantasy* universe in general. Focused on thirdperson shooting elements and a narrative concerning the control of crystals, the trailer shows a young man with a very big sword taking on a large group of foes, and a much more visceral, bloody and vicious approach to combat than that seen in any other game in the series

Final Fantasy Agito XIII
(Mobile) Release: **TBA**

The third of the *XIII* games, it is unconfirmed whether *Agito* will see a European release thanks to western handsets being the poorer cousins of their Japanese equivalents. Set in the Akademia, a magic school, there are a minimum of 12 playable characters. Battle sequences resembling those of PlayStation *FF* incarnations have been seen, and the game is playable online and likely to allow co-operative play





Cloud and Sephiroth in their *Kingdom Hearts* incarnation. Sephiroth has now become Square Enix shorthand for the embodiment of evil, so his guest appearances are very rarely nuanced – come to that, neither are those of Cloud

years after release, with half a million subscribers. It may not be *World Of WarCraft*, but with new French and German localisations released in April 2007, as well as a fourth expansion pack announced for later this year, *FFXI* will have a healthy online presence for the foreseeable future.

FFXI also shows the instinct for innovation that has hallmarked the series: the first major cross-platform MMO (on PC, PS2 and then later 360), updated with expansion packs that have timed-content release so that fans are presented with a new aspect of the world every few months, and translation software that is anecdotally superior to that of any other. Players wanted the ability to breed chocobos: they can now breed chocobos. Undesirable elements were messing up the in-game economy: the loopholes were fixed and offenders removed in continuous culls. Some locations were difficult to travel between: new NPCs offering a teleport service (for a small in-game charge) are due in the next update. It's a model of how to sustain a large online community (the real challenge facing any MMO) through concepts as simple as a constant supply of new features, however small, and a speedy response to feedback.

That, in a sense, shows the major strength of the series. *FFXI* is unlike any other *Final Fantasy* game, just as *FF Tactics*, *FFXII: Revenant Wings* and *FFVI* share nothing beyond some spell names and the odd menu command, and this diversity extends beyond genre to include characters, locations and storylines. It is only recently, following the watershed of *FFX-2* (the first ever direct sequel to a *Final Fantasy* game) that settings and characters have been re-used in other titles.

Whether this development will diminish some of the lustre of the series, the shine that each entry had from being a comprehensive and unique experience within an individual world, remains to be seen. Will *FFXIII*, for example, be complete in the mind without *FF Versus XIII*? Cynics might say that this is exactly the intention behind the Fabula Nova Crystallis project, and it's difficult to deny that the financial incentives for Square Enix to label new product with *Final Fantasy* must be huge – but is there a gaming justification?

The directors and programmers of the various games in the series seem to have worryingly little opinion on the matter: of nine interviews we attended in Tokyo, only the uniform response that having *Final Fantasy* next to your game title is 'a guarantee of quality' was offered (with the honourable exception of Tetsuya Nomura; see page 80). This is understandably the Square Enix company line, but next to the dubious quality of several of the titles it seems slightly disingenuous, if not outright propagandist. Tractor production may be at record levels, but there is a distinct lack of impetus to justify the use of the name on games as diverse as *FF Fables: Chocobo Tales*, *FF Crystal Chronicles*

IT IS ONLY RECENTLY, FOLLOWING THE WATERSHED OF FFX-2 (THE FIRST EVER DIRECT SEQUEL TO A FINAL FANTASY GAME) THAT SETTINGS AND CHARACTERS HAVE BEEN RE-USED IN OTHER TITLES



One of the new animations developed for the PSP port of *Final Fantasy Tactics* which expand on the original's plot



Final Fantasy Tactics Shishi Senso

(PSP) Release: **Out now (Japan), October (US), autumn (UK)**

A remake of the original *Final Fantasy Tactics*, this is one of the few PlayStation ports that PSP owners should welcome. There are several new features, including multiplayer battling and new job classes, as well as an appearance from *FFXII*'s Balthier. Most importantly, a new English translation will replace the awful PS original. Currently topping the Japanese all-format charts

Final Fantasy Tactics Advance 2

(DS) Release: **July (Japan), TBA (US, UK)**

The sequel to the well-received *FF Tactics Advance* makes the inevitable move to the DS, and retains the childlike characters and bright colours, although in the absence of Yasumi Matsuno the original's darker themes have been dropped in favour of a lighter and more optimistic tone – but all that really matters is that the finely-weighted combat mechanics of the original are retained





Final Fantasy VII: Crisis Core

(PSP) Release: **September 9 (Japan), TBA (US, UK)**

This prequel to *FFVII* focuses on Zack Fair and features an intuitive battle system known as Digital Mind Wave. *FFVII* director Hajime Tabata returns to the helm, and is keen to distinguish *Crisis Core* as much as possible from its predecessor. Hands-on, it plays extremely well and could be a worthy successor to its distinguished parent



Lightning (left) is a codename for the character who has a gunblade reminiscent of that of Squall Leonhart. *FFIX* (below) saw the return of more stylised fantasy characters to the series



Let me tell you a story...

Final Fantasy is often cited as the most impressive merging of games and storytelling available, but this is perhaps too kind: the plotlines are often complex nonsense, from the Light Warriors and floating castle of the original to the timestream and SeeD of *FFVIII*. To say that they are dependent on the oldest fantasy clichés and twists to maintain the pace of the action is not to say that this can't be effective, such as the opening to *Final Fantasy XII* which featured little less than the genocide of a nation and the death of all the leading characters. Swiftly the dead turn out not to be dead after all, and there are identical twins, sibling rivalry and love triangles to add to the mix. This can easily be forgiven: after all, *FFXII*'s plot operates on such an epic scale that the intricacies of the individual relationships are often lost within the big sweeps.

Ironically enough, minor characters often provide the most memorable moments, whether helping a lost child find their home, or overhearing a soldier's affection for his posting. There are themes writ large and small throughout *FF*'s narratives: the price of escapism against the value of reality; heroism and redemption; self-sacrifice; identity; love. These are the emotional heartbeats of the series, but also the backdrop for minor as well as major characters to show themselves as rounded individuals.

and *FFXII: Revenant Wings*. It all suggests the lack of an overall brand strategy within Square Enix, other than developing and releasing as many *FF* titles as possible.

And, to be fair, the critical atmosphere around the series can hardly help, with titles treated with a reverence beyond their due. One of the few critical voices raised about *Final Fantasy X*, for example, was in **E**107 (6/10), yet it would be interesting to see if many would stick to the 9/10 excitement they felt at the time. The hyperbole hasn't yet vanished, with Famitsu's readers bizarrely voting *FFX* the greatest game of all time (to be fair, it is said that a lot was apparently lost in the Japanese-to-English translation). *FFXII: Revenant Wings* has thus far received generally positive notices in the Japanese press, yet is as shallow as *FFXII* is deep – indeed, elements of the design (barring the exceptional presentation) are the worst kind of throwback, from the unintelligent enemies to your own team's dull pathfinding abilities, and it can be completed in an afternoon.

Then there are the remakes. This is perhaps a more nuanced issue than it initially appears, the remakes ranging as they do from separate PSP ports of *Final Fantasy I* and *II* to DS *FFIII* and versions of *FFIV* and *VI*. Some of the games (arguably *VI* for overall quality and *III* which had never seen an English localisation) deserve this kind of treatment and repolishing. But can anyone from Square Enix claim that the mediocre *FFII*, or even the original *FF*, is a game worthy of a full price PSP re-release? Decisions such as these lend weight to the interpretation of *Final Fantasy* as cash cow, with Square Enix's treatment of its flagship franchise amounting to systematic profiteering rather than reverential reworking.

Adding to this, and quite apart from this re-engineering of the core titles, the proliferation of spinoffs bearing the *Final Fantasy* name is cause for concern. They aren't new to the series, going as far back as *Final Fantasy Mystic Quest* on the SNES, but perhaps the peak thus far (and the proof that separate brands can be built around non-core titles) was *Final Fantasy Tactics*. The PlayStation original still has a cult following, and is generally regarded as flawless within its own boundaries: the fact that it has *Final Fantasy* in the title seems almost irrelevant next to its appeal for fans. Completely distinct from what had gone before, it paved the way for genre diversification within the series and set a standard that no subsequent spinoff has matched. The GBA played host to *FF Tactics Advance*, a well-received follow up despite adding innovations that divided fans of the original, and *Tactics Advance 2* is forthcoming for the DS – thus the brand of *Final Fantasy Tactics* is far more established than many original IPs.

Tactics, at least, is a more understandable departure (into strategic turn-based battling) than the likes of the baffling *FFVII: Dirge Of Cerberus*, a thirdperson shooter. Nevertheless, this game, an average one at best, sold 392,000 copies in its first week of release in Japan. This is the fundamental issue that Square Enix has to confront: any game that bears the legend '*Final Fantasy*' will obviously sell in large numbers to a dedicated fanbase. But these same games mean that the *Final Fantasy* name is no longer a guarantee of exceptional quality, and as the use of the brand diversifies and diffuses it is difficult to see how Square Enix can stop it becoming even more devalued. *Dirge Of Cerberus*, for example, is only one of (currently) three titles based around *FFVII*: what kind of relationship can these games have to the classic original? Their inspiration may be from a common source, but that doesn't necessarily mean the results will complement each other.

Final Fantasy XII: International Zodiac Jobsystem

(PS2) Release: **September 8 (Japan), TBA (US, UK)**

That mouthful of a subtitle describes the one additional feature this has over the European release: a dozen potential License Boards replace the standard one in the original game, allowing job specialisation. Otherwise it's the same game, with a 'secret DVD' likely to include upcoming game trailers, and some new boxart





Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: Ring Of Fates

(DS) Release: **August 23 (Japan), TBA (US, UK)**

The successor to the fun, but cripplingly flawed, GC original should be helped by DS wifi capability, although the fourplayer mode will still be beset with the problem of how to get four people, four machines and four carts in the same room. If that can be achieved, it's a fun blast, though singleplayer suffers in comparison

Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: The Crystal Bearers

(Wii) Release: **TBA**

The Crystal Bearers has had a massive departure from the trailer released early in the Wii's lifespan. It now features a begoggled and heroic-looking young man performing skydiving stunts from airships as well as engaging in realtime combat with monsters. Few gameplay details (or screens) have been released, though it suffers from looking distinctly GameCube



FFVII: Crisis Core cannot but interfere with the original in some way. The game is a prequel to *FFVII*, and features the story of Zack Fair, a character who was killed in the original game. There is promise in the fact that it looks to differentiate itself from its parent, and the major part of this claim is the battle system: hands-on it is fluid and allows for swift combination attacks and dodges. It's devoid of most of the apparatus you might expect in a *FF* battle system, but slightly less integrated than the gambit system of *FFXII*, thanks mainly to the screen freezing momentarily while 'Battle mode activated' or 'Conflict resolved' text bookends each fight. Overall, however, it's a wholly different experience focused on action rather than careful preparation – but the telling comparisons may be found in an aesthetic rather than a battle system.

The character designer for both *FFVII* and *FFVII: Crisis Core*, Tetsuya Nomura, has opined that the original was limited by the PlayStation's abilities, and that his designs suffered from being plainer than usual. Artists are rarely the best judges of their own work, and *Crisis Core* shows why. The Midgar setting is instantly recognisable, as are several leading characters (the story centres on Sephiroth and heavily features Aeris), although Zack's baby blue eyes and the graphical polish make it a prettier dystopia than before. Aspects of Square Enix games can fall into the category of style over substance, and this is one of the potential pitfalls for *Crisis Core*, with the demo showing only a very limited and linear series of fights – and despite additions such as a mobile phone, Zack seems to be a poor copy of Cloud. That latter point will be made a thousand times, but it's worth pausing to note that Cloud (the most popular main character the series has ever seen) is essentially an abstract design. Representations of him in toys, films and comics as well as Nomura's drawings are, of course, highly detailed, but when the player is in control of Cloud in *FFVII* they are controlling a polygonal model with geometric shapes formed into a body – he doesn't even have a mouth. *FFVII* is themed around a search for identity, the idea of living a perpetual lie, and combined with Cloud's design it is almost impossible for a player not to self-project to some degree. It's impossible to say how important this is to *FFVII*'s unique effect, but it is obviously a factor. Arguments over the changing designs and designers in the series are dominated by crude distinctions between, for example, the humanoid characters of *FFVIII* and the stylised fantasy characters of *FFIX* – but Cloud perhaps indicates that the battle lines need to be redrawn, and consideration given to the concept of designing for imaginative fantasy rather than showcasing a designer's comprehensive imagination.

THE FINAL FANTASY NAME IS NO LONGER A GUARANTEE OF EXCEPTIONAL QUALITY, AND AS THE USE OF THE BRAND DIVERSIFIES IT IS DIFFICULT TO SEE HOW SQUARE ENIX CAN STOP IT BECOMING EVEN MORE DEVALUED

That's not to say that Cloud was ever a cipher – but he is certainly more ambiguous and conflicted in *FFVII* than the action hero of Advent Children. And this is inevitable. After all, he and Sephiroth had to become the frontmen for their own franchise: more of them, and more of their world, was wanted. In some cases (and *Crisis Core* certainly qualifies as one) the results look like they could be of a high quality, but there is also a slight perversion of the original in, for example, the focus on Aeris. Her death was the dramatic highpoint of *FFVII*, and giving fans the resurrection they want arguably undermines this great moment – as **Yoshinori Kitase**, the game's director, said in an interview in **E**123: "People die of disease and accident. Death comes suddenly and there is no notion of good or bad attached to it. It leaves not a dramatic feeling, but a great emptiness. When you lose someone you loved very much you feel this big empty space and think: 'If I had known this was coming I would have done things differently'. These are the





The *Crystal Chronicles* series has always promised knockabout fun, and the DS may prove to be the ideal home for this offshoot. Whether it deserves the name of *Final Fantasy* is another matter entirely, however



Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings
(DS) Release: **Out now (Japan), winter (US), TBA (UK)**

Part of the 'Ivalice Alliance' of games (*FFXII*, PSP *Tactics* and *Tactics Advance 2*), *Revenant Wings* is a strategy game featuring characters from *FFXII*. The cutscenes are some of the best seen on DS, but unfortunately the game offers little in the way of challenge and, oddly enough, suffers from a fundamental lack of strategy

Final Fantasy
(PSP) Release: **Out now (Japan), TBA (US, UK)**

A port of the PlayStation remake of the original *Final Fantasy*. Although featuring nicer graphics than the original, it's a game that time has not been kind to and is best remembered fondly rather than rediscovered. However, if you have a strong desire then the Japanese release includes an English language option, so feel free to import





Final Fantasy II
(PSP) Release: **Out now (Japan), TBA (US, UK)**

Again, a port of the PlayStation remake, but this time of the game generally considered to be the low-point in the series. Thanks to a horrible levelling system and combat, it's strictly for historians, but the game does introduce staples such as Cid and chocobos. Both this and the *Final Fantasy* remake feature redrawn graphics and GBA content – so that's all right, then



The themes of *Final Fantasy Tactics* games are often at odds with the cute characterisation and bright colours. *FF Tactics Advance* featured the ugly spectre of parental alcoholism (which was toned down for western release) applied to Cid. However, the developers of the imminent DS sequel promise a new, lighter tone for the series





Final Fantasy made the leap from 2D to 3D with ease, albeit using 2.5D stepping stones along the way. It's remarkable how many elements of the older games survive and recur

feelings I wanted to arouse in the players with Aeris's death relatively early in the game. Feelings of reality and not of Hollywood."

And it was achieved brilliantly. But now, you can have all the Aeris you want – Advent Children is little more than an extended homage (despite death, she manages to feature prominently) just like the Square Enix-endorsed novella themed around her journey through the lifestream following death. It never does to be idealistic about anything in videogames, but perhaps a certain consistency should be expected, rather than this Hollywood-style pandering to the largest common denominator. The life and death of Aeris in the original was perfectly pitched and preserved her in the mind like amber, but now, just like Jurassic Park, reborn specimens can be found lumbering around everywhere you look.

So, from the 'Compilation of *FFVII*' (as Square Enix describes the *FFVII*-themed spinoffs) back to FFXIII: Fabula Nova Crystallis. *FFXIII* director **Motomu Toriyama** sees the advent of the latter "as a new development style: three development teams focused on a single theme rather than a joint production, each with their own freedom." And is this freedom linked to PS3 exclusivity? "The PS3 simply offers the highest specifications compared to the other consoles, and that's why it has been chosen." That might lead to the concern that, as with *FFX*, *FFXIII* might squander the opportunities of a new technological leap on purely cosmetic upgrades. But pressed about whether the current generation of consoles should offer more than just graphical updates on their predecessors, Toriyama is positively bullish: "The current generation might be perceived as merely visual leaps, but the battle system now looks so realistic that any player will draw more of an emotional experience from their link with the character: actions within the game are presented so realistically that the user feels completely in command." It's an interesting contrast to Nomura's thoughts on the same subject at the end of this article, and suggests that the distinction between *FFXIII* and *FF Versus XIII* will be wide indeed.

But *FFXIII* and *FF Versus XIII* are hardly where the problems lie for *Final Fantasy*. The problems are in the new meaninglessness

Final Fantasy III

(DS) Release: **Out now**

Although available in Japan for over 17 years, it was only on May 4 that non-importing UK gamers finally got the chance to play the third in the series. The last *FF* made for the NES, this solid if unspectacular effort was given a complete overhaul with vastly improved graphics and some of the best DS FMV yet seen, along with several tweakings of outdated features. Reviewed in **E172** (6/10)





Final Fantasy IV

(DS) Release: **TBA**

There might be a theme here. This remake for the DS at least promises significant new content over the original, though whether the promise of being four times as large as the original is simply over-excitement remains to be seen. Again, a solid title, but one that won't sway the unconverted. At the very least, expect an *FFIII*-style overhaul, with impressive FMV cutscenes and a redesign of the characters

Final Fantasy XI: Wings Of The Goddess

(360, PC, PS2) Release: **Winter 2007**

The fourth expansion pack for *Final Fantasy XI* makes it one of the longest-running MMORPGs ever, and is themed around an unknown episode in Vana'diel's history. Offering a new continent for fans to explore, this expansion will, like the others in the series, feature staggered-release content and several new adventures





of the name, standing for neither genre nor theme, and its current association with games that are either below standard or, even when of a good quality, simply not worthy to place beside those core titles. The former could survive if it wasn't for the latter, but there's the rub. Both are now elements of the series, and giant inflatable chocobos and *Crystal Chronicles* are as much a part of *Final Fantasy*'s future as the classic games of the past.

The problem for this future is that *Final Fantasy* has been a great gaming series because, alongside continual excellence, it has been a continual innovator. The series' creator Hironobu Sakaguchi has gone as far as saying that the success of *Final Fantasy* can be attributed to constantly changing and challenging the development teams to try something new, and this marriage of artistic and commercial success is one of the most perfect the industry has ever seen. But it seems to be in the absence of the likes of Sakaguchi that the *Final Fantasy* identity is in danger of growing stale and being defined by individual peaks rather than collective range.

The trailer and pre-release bundles at Square Enix Party 2007 had a portentous Shakespearean strapline next to *Final Fantasy Versus XIII*: 'There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so'. That may be so, but as the future brings a glut of *Final Fantasy* games, the 20th anniversary of the series arriving with boxsets and remakes, and Square Enix president Yoichi Wada confidently predicting that *FFVII* as an individual franchise will be active for 20 years, perhaps we might bear in mind the poet Paul Farley's more restrained observation on laurel-sitting: "More fool you who believe in the end of decades."







Three of the *Final Fantasy* mobile phone games: *Before Crisis* (top), *Chocobo Mobile* and *Dirge Of Cerberus: Lost Episode*. It may be easy to sneer at mobile gaming, but Square Enix has some big future plans in the sector

Dragon Quest

The 'other' RPG franchise owned by Square Enix is, of course, *Dragon Quest*. It's largely unfamiliar to western gamers, with only two games from the series released in Europe, but outsells *Final Fantasy* within Japan. Overseen since inception by creator **Yuji Horii**, every instalment has featured art by Akira Toriyama, music by Koichi Sugiyama, and largely the same creative team behind every game, the polar opposite of *Final Fantasy*.

Dragon Quest is of particular note because of Horii's decision to develop the next game in the series, *Dragon Quest IX: Hoshizora No Mamoribito* (or *Protectors Of The Starry Sky*), exclusively for DS. When asked for the reasons behind the decision, Horii said: "I wanted families and friends to be able to play the game together, and the infrastructure of the DS is something you can plug into very easily and utilise to achieve that." It's a clear allusion to the fourplayer wifi co-op mode that will make or break the game, though the combination of one of Japan's favourite brands with the best-selling hardware currently available will at least guarantee commercial success. More interestingly, this popularity will see it played more than the likes of *Zelda: Four Swords* could have dreamed of, and possibly indicate the way forward for the niche genre of handheld multiplayer titles.



Final Fantasy Fables: Chocobo Tales

(DS) Release: **Out now**

One of the vanguard of incoming *Chocobo* titles, *FF Fables: Chocobo Tales* gives the flightless bird a starring role and several touchscreen minigames to play with. It's a decent effort and at least tries to play with the source material, but unfortunately the execution and appeal is limited. The visuals are vibrant and cheery, though. Reviewed in **E176 (4/10)**

Chocobo's Dungeon: Toki-Wasure No Meikyuu

(Wii) Release: **TBA**

Recently announced, this continuation of the *Chocobo's Dungeon* series is aimed at a younger market, and looks bright enough if unimpressive. The subtitle roughly translates as '*The Labyrinth Of Forgotten Time*', and the game features the city of Vil where everyone has lost their memory. "Many more Chocobo plans" were promised at a recent press conference

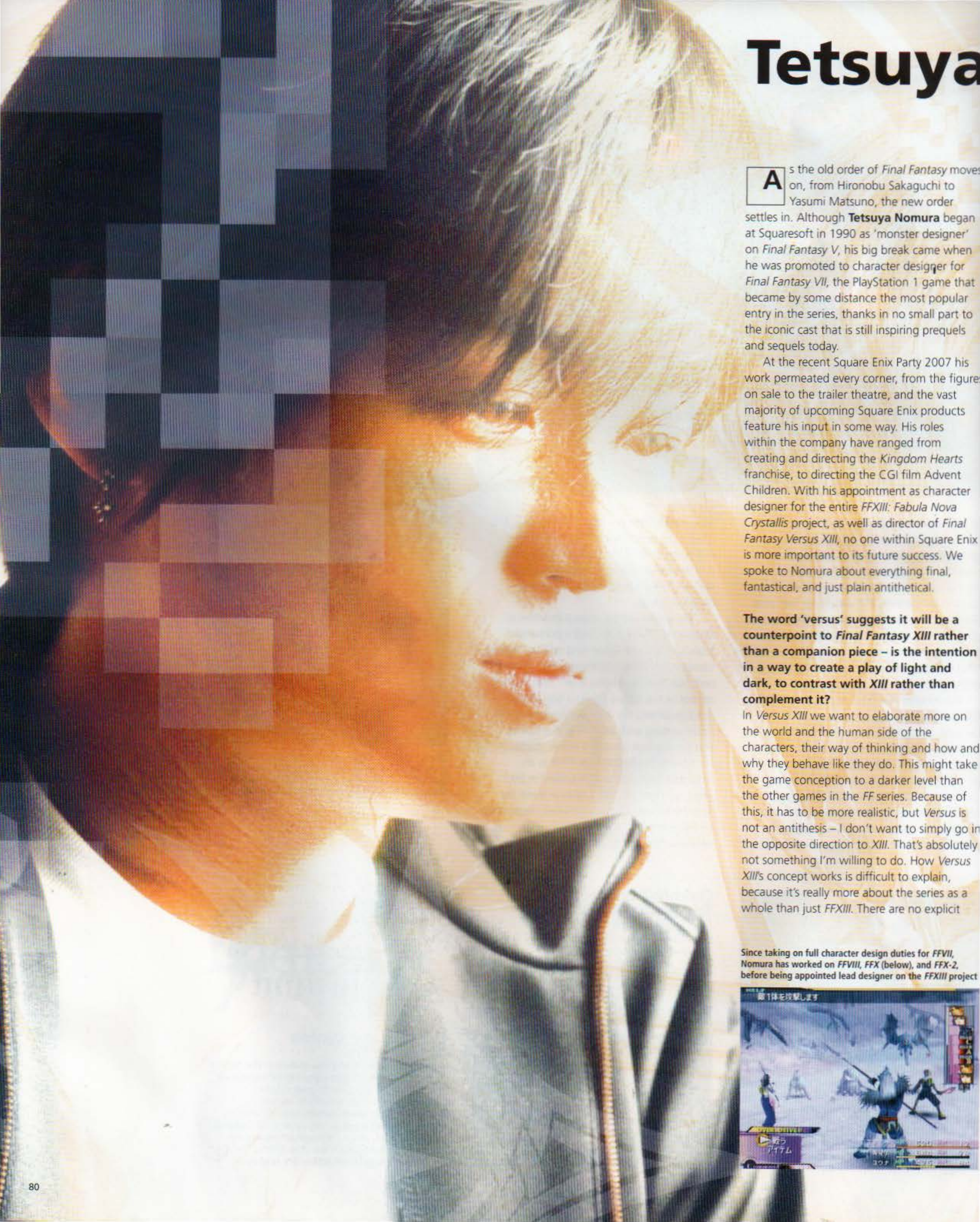




Final Fantasy: Dissidia

(PSP) Release: **TBA**

A short rendered video was shown at the Square Party 2007, featuring the Warrior of Light from the original *FF* along with several other characters from *FFIX* and *FFVII*, including Sephiroth. Details are sketchy thus far, but it will be a PSP title and a one-on-one 3D fighting game set in an arena – though no others are confirmed, characters from throughout the series, à la *Ehrgeiz*, will definitely feature



Tetsuya

As the old order of *Final Fantasy* moves on, from Hironobu Sakaguchi to Yasumi Matsuno, the new order settles in. Although **Tetsuya Nomura** began at Squaresoft in 1990 as 'monster designer' on *Final Fantasy V*, his big break came when he was promoted to character designer for *Final Fantasy VII*, the PlayStation 1 game that became by some distance the most popular entry in the series, thanks in no small part to the iconic cast that is still inspiring prequels and sequels today.

At the recent Square Enix Party 2007 his work permeated every corner, from the figures on sale to the trailer theatre, and the vast majority of upcoming Square Enix products feature his input in some way. His roles within the company have ranged from creating and directing the *Kingdom Hearts* franchise, to directing the CGI film Advent Children. With his appointment as character designer for the entire *FFXIII: Fabula Nova Crystallis* project, as well as director of *Final Fantasy Versus XIII*, no one within Square Enix is more important to its future success. We spoke to Nomura about everything final, fantastical, and just plain antithetical.

The word 'versus' suggests it will be a counterpoint to *Final Fantasy XIII* rather than a companion piece – is the intention in a way to create a play of light and dark, to contrast with *XIII* rather than complement it?

In *Versus XIII* we want to elaborate more on the world and the human side of the characters, their way of thinking and how and why they behave like they do. This might take the game conception to a darker level than the other games in the *FF* series. Because of this, it has to be more realistic, but *Versus* is not an antithesis – I don't want to simply go in the opposite direction to *XIII*. That's absolutely not something I'm willing to do. How *Versus XIII*'s concept works is difficult to explain, because it's really more about the series as a whole than just *FFXIII*. There are no explicit

Since taking on full character design duties for *FFVII*, Nomura has worked on *FFVIII*, *FFX* (below), and *FFX-2*, before being appointed lead designer on the *FFXIII* project

Nomura



Crisis Core serves as a timely reminder of Nomura's achievements: his characters regularly inspire such devotion that sequels and spinoff titles are inevitable, and his game credits range from *Parasite Eve* to *Kingdom Hearts*

rules for how a *Final Fantasy* game should be – and so every version is that design team's interpretation of certain themes, and their answer to that question of what *FF* should be. *FFXIII* belongs to that mainstream tradition. I want to propose another view of how *FF* could be, or should be: there is a long tradition, and my intention is that *Versus* will be distinct from that.

How do you consider that *Versus XIII* can offer this counterpoint to the *Final Fantasy* series?

The stories from the past entries in the *Final Fantasy* series are not exactly as I would have done, but that's as it should be because I didn't direct them. My only concern in terms of *Versus XIII* is that *FF* always talks about human emotion and psychologies in a broad way, and I want to go deeper in terms of offering some crude reality in terms of human emotion or human behaviour. The goal, when a player holds a controller and plays an RPG, is to make them believe in another world – to experience a dream in a fictional world. It will be different in *Versus XIII* because of the intrusion of the real world, and things that are really happening. There will be less fiction and more reality.

Do you mean real-world events?

Absolutely.

So *Versus XIII* shares little with the other games in *Fabula Nova Crystallis*?

The only common element to all three games is an underlying mythology that inspires each game's story. There are no particular shared aspects of the stories, characters or locations, but there is a battle of the gods that lies behind each tale and gives it inspiration in a different way.

Do you think the power of the new generation of consoles means that there is a responsibility on game developers to deliver a new kind of gaming experience, rather than just better graphics, and is this part of your thinking with *Versus XIII*?

Is there a new direction for game conception in general? If there is, then like you say it's less about breathtaking graphics and perhaps more of a level design problem – one of the directions that interests me is how to manage and create, using the PS3, a seamless environment. In the past, field space has always been limited technically – in *Versus XIII* we want to see a seamless environment, and that in itself will create new situations and game elements. For example, someone could be shooting at you from a very great distance, or a battle could be happening both outside and inside a building in a very seamless manner. That's part of what we want to do using new technology.

All the games you have been director of have tended to move away from a traditional RPG interface towards more dynamic interactions, particularly in battles. Will this be something that is carried over to the new game?

It's true that we don't want to create a classic RPG with a game system driven by command menus. Our intention with *Versus XIII* is to create a more action-oriented system with more intuitive controls, but this doesn't mean the entire game will be action. The only firm instruction I've given the team is to look at the best examples of the thirdperson shooter genre – not in simplistic terms, like controls or mechanics, but in the way they create tension and mood and incorporate the action within that.

Those previous projects as director were the *Kingdom Hearts* games, which are much lighter than what we know of *Versus XIII*. Is the darker concept you have outlined a necessary change for you as director?

The world of *Versus XIII* might be a little closer to my personal taste than *Kingdom Hearts*, but the entire project owes something to *Kingdom Hearts* as well. When I first began *KH* I was part of the *FF* core team, and tried to bring elements of that into the development. The *KH* team was always inspired by *FF*, and I'd like to see that reversed. But as for the differences between *KH* and *FF*, *KH* is a lighter world of magic, fantasy, and people doing good things. I've been in that world for a very long time – perhaps too long.

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

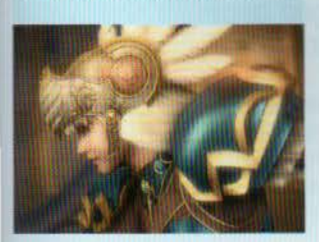
Edge's most played

Guitar Hero II



The tracklisting of *Guitar Hero Encore* that's been revealed to date has us more excited about the proper third, Sabotage-featuring instalment. More practise, then...
360, REDOCTANE

Valkyrie Profile: Lenneth



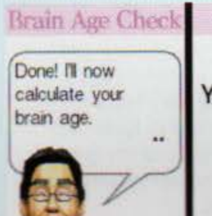
The PSP can sometimes be an ideal fit, even for remakes of seven-year-old games: returning to Midgard to round up warriors for Odin is compulsive in train journey chunks
PSP, SQUARE ENIX

Okami



Another month, more *Okami*. You can tell a game's great when your friends always ask to borrow it – and you always have to tell them that you'll be done with it... soon
PS2, CAPCOM

An honest criminal
How the DS is breeding a new pirate generation



Brain Training's Stamp Mode, which lets you mark off each day's play on a calendar, has a lot to answer for inclining people to pirate games

As you may have read in the feature on game piracy beginning on p8, new technology is proving little barrier to those determined to break the protections game publishers and console manufacturers put in place. Their motives are various – greed, technical curiosity, a philosophical desire to stick it to the man – but the intentions of those who buy into the modchips and 'backup' carts that the hackers create are usually simpler.

For all the talk of homebrew and circumventing region lockouts, the fact remains that most people mod their consoles so that they can have free games. Even principled technophiles, who are genuinely curious to explore indie development projects, experience rare import titles and try to get MSN Messenger running on every electronic device they own, are likely to find that at least a few retail games end up among the files they download. And, for the moment, it's Nintendo's DS that is leading the piracy stakes. A far cry from the days when Nintendo seemed to be aggressively policing GBA ROM downloads, DS ROMs are currently freely available all over the internet, and the carts needed to play them are cheap and user-friendly. And Nintendo is facing a new kind of piracy own-goal: its new approach to game design is fuelling its uptake.

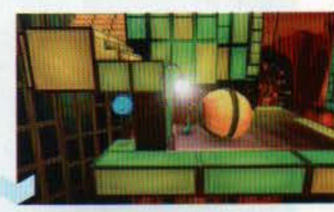
Following the success of *Brain Training*, *Nintendogs* and *Animal Crossing: Wild World*, more and more DS games have functions that require or reward daily, or time-specific play. *Pokémon Diamond/Pearl* (reviewed p84) asks you to bury valuable spheres for a particular number of realtime days. *Picross DS* (reviewed p95) charts your daily progress in the manner of Professor Kawashima. And as the number of games like that mounts, so does the number you need to carry with you on your travels. But multiple carts equate to multiple hassle, and multiple risk of losing the hundreds of hours you may have invested. So, suddenly, a larger cart – or one which takes micro-SD cards – starts to feel like a legitimate peripheral. It's a tool not for doing things Nintendo doesn't want you to do, like stealing software or over-ruling region lockouts, but for doing the things Nintendo does want you to do, like playing every day and integrating gaming into your life. Reckon that'll stand up in court?











Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten





POKÉMON DIAMOND/PEARL

FORMAT: DS PRICE: $35 (£18) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: GAME FREAK





Diamond/Pearl introduces the Pokétech (above) to take advantage of the DS's screens. Compatible with little bits of software you find as you travel, the device can act as a watch, a pedometer, a guide to berry locations or a quick reference to your team's health. The casino makes a return, offering a very basic, but diverting, slot machine (right)

You can't complain. It's not like they didn't warn you. Just over ten years on from the debut of *Red/Green*, the name remains the same. From one end of the rainbow to the other, and rapidly working its way through the world's stock of valuable minerals, the red, green, blue, yellow, gold, silver, crystal, ruby, sapphire, diamond and pearl evolutions of *Pokémon* haven't changed its spots. The name hasn't changed because the game hasn't changed. These aren't sequels, they're variants – descendents.

And so, sitting at the bottom of the family tree, *Diamond/Pearl* stands to inherit a lot – not least the 493 Pokémon which make up the full current roster (some are only available in each version of *Diamond/Pearl*, others only from linking up to older *Pokémon* games). And then there is the day/night cycle, the berry-based cooking games, the hidden bases, the talent shows. *Pokémon* has long been the most deceptively simple of the stat-heavy Japanese RPGs, but this new version takes a kitchen sink approach to delivering on the game's appeal.

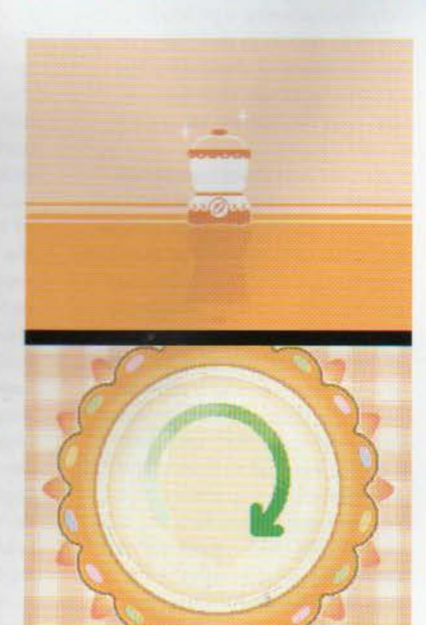
The central attraction – catching 'em all – remains one of gaming's most inspired mechanics. Meeting a new creature in the



The evolutions of Pokémon haven't changed its spots. The name hasn't changed because the game hasn't. These aren't sequels, they're variants

wild can still be heart-stopping, the process of whittling down its health and ekeing out your Pokéball supply a delightful agony. Running up against new enemies in trainer battles leaves you with a frustratingly empty entry in your Pokédex and a nagging hunger to find and capture your own. As ever, it's this, rather than the (fundamentally recycled – even if Team Rocket is now Team Galactic) plot or bland environments that fuels your enthusiasm through the game.

And, as ever, the strategic satisfaction comes not so much from the battles themselves, where a good memory (or a crafty printout from GameFAQs) will guide you through the scissors-paper-stone dynamics, but from assembling and training the team you'll take into battle. Balancing skills and attacks (see 'Push me, pull you'), deciding which Pokémon should hold which item, keeping them happy with massages and treats, breeding from some and denying evolution to others is the meat and drink of the game: battles themselves are just the proof of the pudding. And, in this respect, the adjustments made by *Diamond/Pearl*,



One of the least engaging minigames is the Poffin (a sort of Poké-muffin) making process. Stirring back and forth without spilling is pretty stultifying stuff, even when it's done in collaboration with other players

Battles are hardly visually spectacular, but the majority of the Pokémon have charm and the attack animations have some flair. For a closer look, it's worth spending some time in the dressing room (right), tarting up your charges, even if the choice of costume components is a little odd





such as splitting attack types into three more intuitive categories (physical, special and status), help you master what was becoming a baroque and overly complex system.

But, with all these other distractions, it's possible to play for hours without strategising or battling (assuming you stay out of the long grass – random battles still forming the backbone of the game's interaction). You can dress your Pokémon up, pose them for photographs, experiment with different mulches for your berry groves, excavate underground tunnels for precious stones, enter Simon-style dance competitions or play the slot machines. Not, this being *Pokémon*, that any of these activities are disconnected from the main game. Everything you do has a potential impact on your team of creatures and their battle abilities, meaning that while no effort is ever wasted, there's a real lack of anything that feels like downtime – the kind of genuinely superfluous, just-for-the-hell-of-it pastimes seen in other RPGs.

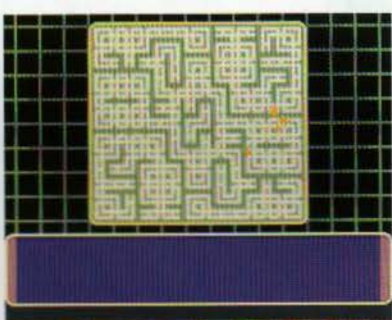
Nor are the multiplayer provisions any less elaborate. Both local and wifi (Friend Codes only) trade and battles are enabled, and a bland but enormous underground series of passages which runs under the entire game world (and is home to your secret base) lets you meet up and catch each other out with hidden traps and tricks. Voice chat, via the inbuilt microphone, adds to the convivial atmosphere.

But it's in these elements that the DS is best exploited. Although the touchscreen is used (aside from a few tiny hiccups) to streamline the game's elegantly thought-out menus, and despite the subtle 3D elaborations of the familiar environments, it's hard to shake the impression than this is largely the game Game Freak would have released as a GBA sequel. Ten years ago, *Pokémon* was the most mainstream game in the world, with *Red/Green/Blue/Yellow* racking up an eventual 45 million copies (around three times what any *GTA* game has managed). Now, despite the enormous popularity the series still commands (it sold a million in just a few days in Japan, and broke US preorder records), it's showing its age – overstuffed with too many legacy features, too many of which (like the random battles) have been outmoded.

But for all its flaws – the new Pokémon designs are patchy, if sometimes excellent, the sound effects are awful, the dialogue and storyline lacking the pizzazz (let alone the originality) that most Nintendo handheld titles deliver as standard – it's still impossible to knock *Diamond/Pearl*'s achievements. Ten years on, and despite clumsy copycat errors like *Spectrobes*, there's still nothing like *Pokémon*. Bright and breezy, it offers almost bottomless value, creates a believable and consistent world, offers real strategic challenge as well as the kind of brainless completism that's best suited to delayed trains and rainy afternoons, and hides a staggeringly intricate set of mechanics inside an accessible and non-threatening gameworld. It may still be the same old game, but that's high praise, not carping criticism. **[8]**



The Pokécentre is still your base of operations – healing wounded creatures, allowing you access to the PC that stores your complete collection of Pokémon, and acting as restart points should you faint in battle





You can chose any location for your secret base in the vast underground tunnel network which lies below the overworld. Excavating suspicious-looking walls yields precious stones which can be swapped for decorations for your hideout, or re-buried to enhance their worth



Although the core plotline of challenging each town's gym leader remains, the gyms themselves are more varied, like this one based on a simple spatial puzzle. Fun at first, it frustrates if you suffer repeated defeats

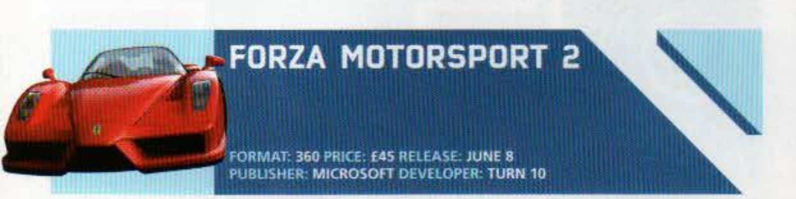
Push me, pull you



A fairly neat summary of *Pokémon*'s interconnected complexity is the moves system. Each Pokémon can learn a total of four, erasing one to learn the optional new skills they learn as they level up. You'll be balancing the types of each move against your Pokémon's own type (a fire Pokémon gets a boost on fire-type moves), against each other, so you have a range of attacks in case your enemy is immune, and on the basis of their PP ratings – moves with a low PP can only be used sparingly. Complicating this are HMs, single-use items which teach moves to compatible Pokémon, and TMs which teach attack moves which can also affect the game world (clearing paths by smashing rocks, for example). And then, all of these moves have a secondary purpose, gaining different categories of acclaim when used in the Pokémon talent show. It's a dazzlingly complex system.



The environments lack any real charisma, but the sight of a seemingly inaccessibly Pokéball triggers a thirst to explore, and well-planned shortcuts speed your journey through Sinnoh



FORZA MOTORSPORT 2

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £45 RELEASE: JUNE 8
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: TURN 10



Forza 2's career mode opens with races set at its narrow and tortuously technical test track. After all the twisting and turning, it's a relief to finally get out to the high speed Maple Valley Raceway and be able to floor it down a long straight



Arcade mode features exhibition races with stock cars and free practise sessions with cars from your garage. It also features time trials – runs with preset cars, with awards for beating times

There are 1 race(s) left in the Boosted Shootout. You're 52,068CR from Driver Level 21, and you have 389,884CR in the bank. Where to?'

It's the menu that appears after every career race, headed by this situational piece of text, that confirms *Forza Motorsport 2*'s nature. You might assume it to be a pure console sim-racer, with a hefty stable of carefully-modelled cars and a large roster of tracks. And it's obvious that it follows *Gran Turismo*'s nearly decade-old template of win race, buy parts, tune and race again.

But the truth is that *Forza 2* has extended that RPG structure, which allows players to choose how, where and what they race, much further towards its logical conclusion.

Forza 2's career mode bears all the hallmarks of such principles. Just as they did in its predecessor, race winnings don't only buy you parts and new cars, but gain driver levels. Gaining levels unlocks new tournaments and models of cars, as well as discounts on certain marques. Stretching the principle further is the need for you to choose a region to play from. It doesn't limit which manufacturers can be accessed, but sets discounts on manufacturers from that region, a little like character class in an RPG.

More fundamentally, however, Turn 10 has used the RPG model to subtly reshift *Forza 2* as a post-*Gran Turismo* racing game. Because, just as an RPG is about character development, *Forza 2* is about car development. The opportunities to customise and develop player-owned cars are far deeper than in *GT*, which, by contrast, looks more about accruing a full garage.

For example, *Forza 2* awards a race winnings bonus depending on the rarity of the car you used. Rarity level is preset, but can be added to by buying new parts, an encouragement to tinker and improve. *Forza 2* also encourages focus on specific cars by levelling them according to the winnings they've earned. Gaining levels earns discounts on their parts and increases the bonus they earn on winning races.

And then, just to drive the point home, there's the decal system. Expanded from its inception in *Forza* and allowing over 4,000 layers of shapes to be placed over each car, it allows a rare level of investment and ownership over such virtual objects.

It's the online auction house, at which players can buy and sell cars for career-mode cash, the photo mode, taken wholesale from *PGR3*, and online racing in general that give reason for such investment. It provides a naturally public place to show off, celebrate and profit from the effort spent in the game.



The driving model strikes a wonderful balance between simulation and thrills, and even the lower class cars can be skittish and wild

The result of this shift in focus is that the career mode is less a game in itself than a proving ground for its cars. It's a place for players to try out models, fiddle with and adjust them, learn how they ride the corners of each track, try out a new paint job.

But without the overarching purpose that online affords it, career mode can feel a little staid. After all, it's based on an ageing template. And, in general, it fails to avoid the old *Gran Turismo* temptation to enter enormously powerful cars for easy races, a curious regression from *GT4*'s A-Spec Points.







At any point during a race or replay, the action can be paused and pictures be taken with the same tool that was developed for *PGR3*. As with that game, pictures can be uploaded to *Forza 2*'s website. It's a mode worth playing with, as the car models are superb, and the custom decal system provides a great way to show off to your friends









Race in style

Forza 2 is meticulously visually designed in every respect. Its cleanly laid-out interface is thoroughly considered, from the thoughtful option before entering a race of seeing which drivers will be driving which cars, to being shown whether your current car is eligible for events and, if not, whether you own cars that are.

The menu that appears after each race efficiently takes you onward, whether to the next event or back to the garage. Its smooth, clean, preciseness mirrors the in-race graphics, which are sharp and run flawlessly at 60Hz. While some players might well find the interface soulless, others will certainly appreciate the way it sits back to allow the racing to flow unimpeded.





Damage modelling includes bumpers, wing mirrors and spoilers that buckle and fall off to remain on the track. Car models also deform, but not as dynamically as the likes of those in this month's other big racing game, *DIRT*

The racing, in itself, is excellent, striking a wonderful balance between simulation and thrills. Even the lower class cars can be skittish and wild – it's easy to spin a Mazda MX-5, and the Golf GTi will eagerly skid over rumble strips, especially with the racing aids switched off the way they should be. Naturally, this means that the racing classes demand extreme respect – they spin and slide at the least drop in concentration.

That said, with the driving aids switched on, *Forza 2* still gives an accessible and entertaining race. A large part of Turn 10's considerable achievement is that the game encompasses pretty much any player skill that might come to it, while losing nothing of the hardcore simulation that underlies it.

Racing AI, too, is great. The career mode offers a persistent list of opponents, each with its own character, from A Takahashi, who is (according to his bio) cautious in traffic, to P Muller, who's cool under pressure. In races, it's hard to track exactly who is racing in which car, but they behave intelligently, avoiding contact and turning many evenly pitched events into constantly position-changing battles. It's not unusual, too, to see them autonomously crash, and there's little evidence of rubber banding.

The close nature of many AI races is enhanced by *Forza 2*'s attitude to track etiquette: it awards winnings bonuses for getting through races without getting hit, and penalises damage and going off-road. Along with the reappearance of *Forza*'s racing line, which dynamically indicates appropriate speeds and track position (but can be switched off), this system can make racing a mannered experience. *Forza 2* certainly lacks the exuberance of *PGR3*.

But exuberance is not what *Forza 2* is about. Investment and pride are what it takes to make the best of what *Forza* offers. That *Forza 2* fails to present a convincing model for how the offline sim-racing game can move on is a pity, but one born of the fact that the career mode is little more than an update to its predecessor.

Still, *Forza 2*'s core driving is so perfectly built, and its online integration so well formed, that it affords any such investment real, and new, meaning. **[9]**





Races against the AI in a closely-matched car will often feature constant taking and losing of the lead. It's imperative to keep your line to avoid bonus-stealing contact, or even a speed-sapping trip on to the grass



COLIN MCRAE: DIRT

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3 PRICE: £50 (CONSOLES), £35 (PC) RELEASE: JUNE 15 (PS3 TBC) PUBLISHER: CODEMASTERS DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E167, E171, E176

Reality bites



From Championship Off Road Racing (CORR) to cross-country rally and epic hill climbs, the world of *DIRT* is wide, eclectic and utterly beautiful. Completists will bemoan the lack of dynamic weather and rainfall, each track having its own fixed conditions, but there's quite enough here to indulge the game's spectrum of disciplines. Licensed events include the BP Ultimate Rally Challenge and the Lucas Oil Buggy Series, with the much-vaunted highlight being the full-length Pike's Peak ascent, totalling 12.4 miles of open views, tight bends and straights that yearn for the accelerator. Somehow, the game seems to load each of these entirely into RAM, meaning an instant restart option for all races.

After almost a decade of mud, sweat and tears, it's time to find out what lies at the end of Codemasters' obsession. Is it a defining moment in rally to justify all previous trial and error? Is it a revelation in the shape of Neon, the tech that promises more natural environments than racing has ever seen? Or is it a sense that obsession, once fulfilled, leaves a frustrating sense of finality?

Fear not: the *McRae* series hasn't come to the end of one era without thinking of what comes next. It does, in fact, have two new obsessions to keep future instalments occupied, the first of which is you, the proud owner of this incredible driving suite. Whenever *DIRT* loads a race it reads to you a biography: what and where you like to drive, how high you've jumped, how far you've drifted, how badly you've crashed and what victories you've enjoyed. On and on it goes until the race begins.

The second obsession is with the world – the one thing the series has left to conquer. You'll notice right away that this isn't the Colin McRae brand it used to be, or even a brand for US hotshot Travis Pastrana. But the ubiquity of Pastrana's name and voice says a lot about what *DIRT* represents. This *TOCA*-style jamboree of everything off-road yearns for global attention, its play to the American market obvious throughout, though unnecessary given its irresistible looks.

Photorealism might not lurk around the game's every corner but it certainly does around some, ready to stun you with its completeness. Neon wields 360 like a sword it's pulled from a stone, its shadows, lighting, reflections, motion effects, draw distance, weather and antialiasing exceptional in every corner of its globe. There are glitches, though, and there is occasional slowdown, which in a game so close to the zenith can be agonising to behold.

Just as well, then, that it handles as well as it looks. *DIRT* is a ferociously tactile game that brings you closer than ever to the ground beneath your wheels, leaving no doubt that every surface, transition and crash is being filtered through an anatomy of high performance parts. Neon's physics system dents and buckles more than you'd expect, and when internal components take a hit you immediately feel the change.

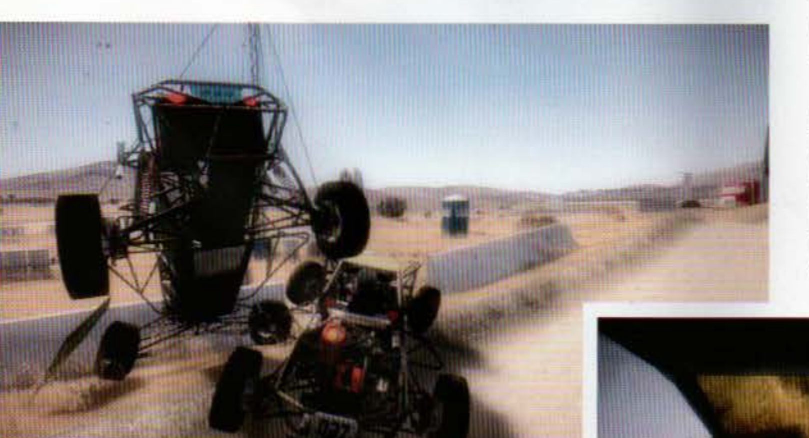
There are problems with its career mode, however. Like *TOCA*, *DIRT* covers too much ground to properly cohere, its tracks still favouring the shortest that Rally has to offer. You race, pick a new race from the delightfully animated menu and repeat until you're done. For offline-only players this leaves little sense of ceremony to make up for the lack of splitscreen multiplayer, while traditional race fans will begrudge the lack of online track competition.

As a game of corners, conditions and the times in which you master them, *DIRT* is an outstanding engine of online competition, powered by an outstanding engine of sight, sound and physics. What lies at the end of Codemasters' obsession? The beginning of your own. [8]

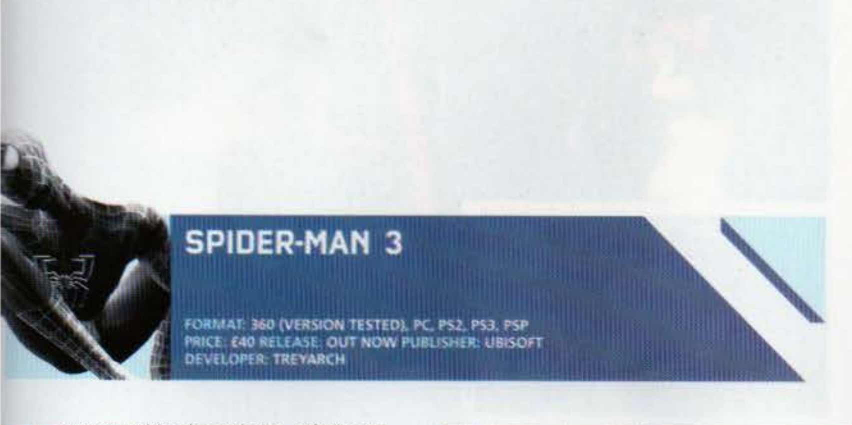
DIRT's difficulty levels are consistent and alterable throughout a career. Pro Am and above are highly recommended, however, to enjoy the myriad effects of the game's full internal damage models



Advanced players will surely get the most out of *DIRT*, not least via the best cockpit cameras racing's ever seen. The roll cage and window frames buckle as they should, the dashboards modelled to within pixels of perfection



Codemasters has made plenty of noise about its new driver AI, and rightly so. Believable errors spin even the best drivers out of contention, though only at the higher difficulty levels do they chase those unassailable leads



SPIDER-MAN 3

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS2, PS3, PSP
PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: UBISOFT
DEVELOPER: TREYARCH

The web rodeo move (above) may look fantastic, but when simply switching on your spider-sense and mashing the buttons ends fights more quickly, there's little motivation to use it. Contextual actions such as tearing the bonnets from cars (left) will quickly become repetitive and tired

Overstretching boundaries, refusing to accept even the exceptional, and overcoming self-doubt. It's what heroism is all about, and combined with the outcast nature of his alter ego it's the essence of Peter Parker. Even the other characters in his world recognise his need to constantly do better and do more, and who didn't enjoy a wry smile at Aunt May pointing out to him "you're not Superman, you know". She's right: *Spider-Man 3* isn't quite as bad as *Superman Returns*, but unfortunately they have more than the odd thing in common.

Both are film tie-ins, both feature iconic comic-book characters with well-defined skills and a library of source material, and both are rushed and obviously incomplete games that could have been great. But where *Superman Returns* showed promise that was ultimately ruined by development hell and a paradoxically late-but-then-rushed release, *Spider-Man 3* began with solid foundations in the superhero genre and has somehow managed to get it wrong.

A great deal of the framework of *Spider-Man 3* is reused from its predecessors. This means that where there was magic, there's still magic, particularly in the most important movement mechanic: webswinging. Basic swinging is now handled by a combination of the right trigger and the left analogue stick, which allows simple and satisfying 'thwip' action between the skyscrapers of New York. And when combined with the boost, web zip, double web lines, jump, wall run, increasing swing speeds and sky stunts,



simple and satisfying quickly becomes fast, exhilarating and as complex as you like.

Conversely, the combat looks right, playing out quickly and feeling quite meaty as Spider-Man bounces merrily from thug to thug, but perhaps it's time Treyarch, and developers as a whole, realised that a monkey could press random buttons and get the same result as an evolved monkey, and thus fighting feels pretty pointless, pretty quickly. Boss battles are worse, consisting of nothing more than an endlessly frustrating and repetitive dodge/attack system, offering little in the way of either tactical direction or accurate collision detection.

Finally, a great deal of the missions are set indoors in cramped environments. This is bad enough for the free soaring crimefighter in us all, but when combined with the hamfisted implementation is enough to make you swear off Spandex forever. The indoor camera is terrible, the objectives set are mostly arbitrary (and – damn you, Snake – include stealth missions), and the environments are sterile. This latter point



There's no denying how good Spidey himself looks, but backdrops as pretty as this are few and far between. Air stunts (main) and roof-hanging (left) add panache, but prove to be ultimately limited fun

extends into the initially stunning Manhattan: after half an hour you'll realise that every single car is either yellow or brown, civilians are the same few character models recycled, and interactivity is a dirty word.

Ultimately, Spider-Man somehow pulls this game out of the flames, albeit badly burned, hyperventilating, with a smashed coccyx and a pair of broken legs. The contrast couldn't be greater between the character and his environment: one everything he should be and a thrill to play as, the other completely undeserving. The frequent glitches and pop-up testify to a lack of preparation, and a question has to be asked about what exactly Treyarch has been doing for the past two years. More execrable, then, than Excelsior. **[3]**

Listen up, true believer



The cast of *Spider-Man 3* will be instantly recognisable to fans, and several of the game's characterisations show an obvious love and have real charm – J Jonah Jameson's barked demands and alliterative urges in particular ("Here's your headline, Robbie – 'Rampaging Reptile Ravages City'"). All characters are voiced by their Hollywood counterparts, barring Kirsten Dunst, although Tobey Maguire's performance leaves something to be desired.

The recognisable voices are needed, however, to make the characters seem less like rubber aliens. In comparison with that other big movie licence, *Pirates Of The Caribbean*, *Spider-Man 3*'s characters have about as much visual personality as an empty bag of crisps: wireframe lips, waxy eyes and rigid hair are the order of the day. It's far from the 'next generation superhero game' that was promised.



Doing whatever a spider can still has the thrills of yesteryear, but yesteryear was in the last generation. Using double web-lines (right) to make quick turns is one of the game's better features, but note the line of uniform cars snaking off into the background. You can have any colour, as long as it's beige





WARTECH: SENKO NO RONDO

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: G.REV

A girl cried. She cried so much that all of the world left, and when she had died and therefore stopped crying the world's population came back: thus the world was reborn. And cut: to airborne robots in a 2D circular battlefield piloted by an assortment of pneumatic characters. The subtext of all this crying and flying is an unspecified disaster that meant humans had to colonise space before returning to Earth, but the various strands of the story are simply the justification for mechanical constructions knocking each other around. So plot is not *Wartech*'s strong point. Not that this is a great problem – indeed it's largely irrelevant to the blur of delicate flying, deadly guns and gigantic enemies that make up one of Xbox 360's most curious, and welcome, east-to-west conversions to date.

Developer G.rev's background is in the shooting genre (specifically arcades – see **E**151), and includes *Border Down* and *Under Defeat* as well as credits on genre highlights *Ikaruga* and *Gradius V*. *Wartech* has frequently been referred to as a hybrid of shooting and fighting, but that doesn't mean it's an aerial *Virtua Fighter*. Far from it – the melee attacks depend on dashing into close quarters (whereupon the camera will also zoom in) and either going for the metal jugular or dodging around your opponent until an opening appears and then button mashing. On the one hand, it's undeniably pleasing to charge straight at another Rounder, teleport as they swipe at fresh air and then smash them into the electric field that surrounds the arena. However, the first Rounder to land a blow stuns the other, so every melee exchange is a simple matter of landing that first hit and then performing an easy combo. Each character has several melee moves, and liberal use of the dash manoeuvre will add some tactical movement to the short exchanges, but there's no real depth to the close combat.

The shooter part of the equation more than makes up for this, though, with a series of weapons that keep getting bigger, deadlier and more screen-filling by the button press. *Wartech*'s arcade origins (and G.rev's expertise) are most obvious here, particularly in the B.O.S.S. attacks which transform your Rounder into a behemoth that regenerates health for every bit of damage done to your opponent. It immediately creates an attack/defence dichotomy for its short duration, and can turn the tide of a versus match instantly. And this is where the real appeal of *Wartech* resides: the singleplayer campaign is functional enough and different for each of the eight characters, but this replayability is essential because it's also a short experience and one that doesn't require any of the more advanced weapon combinations or battle techniques to clear. Versus matches are where the pronounced differences between the characters as well as the subtleties of control and weapons come into their own, and Xbox Live support ensures these complexities are put to use.

Wartech's unlike any other game on Xbox 360, and though there are problems – most obviously the singleplayer mode and the occasional ineffective weapon – anyone prepared to look beyond the candy colourings and initially floaty controls will discover a game of real depth and precision. G.rev has crafted something original from established Japanese gaming elements, and Ubisoft has published a quirky game in the west. More, please.

[7]



The bars at the side of the screen provide a constant list of your floaty robot's activities, while the radii around your character indicate the range within which melee attacks will be activated, or alternatively the limit of your shields



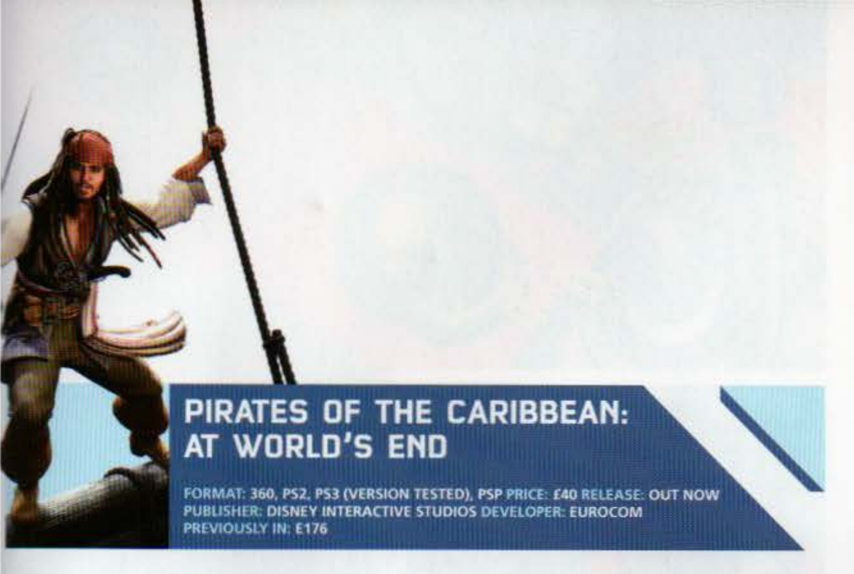


Close-up shots suggest that perhaps the host's full muscle isn't being exploited, although the pyrotechnic fireworks of a hectic battle are such a dazzling sight it doesn't really matter

Pillow talk



Dakimakura (literally 'hugging pillows') is not a new bedfellow for games, and an appropriately themed example was at one point a controversial element of Microsoft's marketing strategy for the release of *Dead Or Alive Online* on the original Xbox. Accompanying manga, books and television shows, they're commonplace enough in Asia that it's hardly a surprise to find two of the game's characters, Changpo (above) and Ernula, taking a break from their mechs to be stretched over a metre or so of pillow fabric – available for the sum of ¥8,400 (£35), slightly more than the game itself. Microsoft has obviously woken up to the fact that teenage anime girls can be a contributor to critical and commercial success (whether this is the case with *Senko No Rondo* is open to debate, although Changpo came fifth in a survey of favourite Xbox 360 female leads undertaken by Japanese website gamespark.jp), and there's no doubt that this latest merchandise will shift units and perhaps even increase sales of the game in its home territory – all helping the Xbox brand lose that unwanted, unprofitable gaijin status.



PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: AT WORLD'S END

FORMAT: 360, PS2, PS3 (VERSION TESTED), PSP **PRICE:** £40 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** DISNEY INTERACTIVE STUDIOS **DEVELOPER:** EUROCOM **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E176

Pirates Of The Caribbean: At World's End is perhaps the most frustrating film licence released this year for a wide variety of reasons, but all of them all coming from the same source: derivation. If a future curator wanted to compile a list of adventure gaming clichés within a day, they could play this game with a notepad and take the evening off. *At World's End* is what happens when a game is developed in the knowledge that it will sell bucketloads of copies off the back of something bigger.

There is, at least, a little diversity. The game consists of three main elements: adventuring and combat sections, where you explore an environment while dealing with regular enemies; town sections, where your character explores a location to find clues about the next level; and duelling sections, where you swordfight with a boss character using a relatively simple combination of the analogue stick and three buttons. The adventuring and combat sections feature repetitive, grinding fighting: the most frequent outcome being that, after blocking your sword twice, enemies present their back to you for a slashing. It's a singularly curious piece of animation, and ruins any chance the combat system had of creating a believable illusion. And perhaps it's the wrong game to be looking for this kind of detail, but should enemies many times brawnier than Cap'n Jack really be vanquished (and scream in pain) from a dodge and push to the chest?

The town-hub sections are in some ways the game's biggest problem. Being sent around a nondescript town to search for a particular store that looks like any other kind of store, or trying to find five of a particular kind of item before an event is triggered, is simply not fun. Many games have suffered from the inclusion of these 'hub' sections, and it's difficult to defend them as a concept when games such as *At World's End* continue to have any flow the main game may have accumulated broken up needlessly.

Added to these difficulties, NPCs in towns will randomly vanish in the middle of the street, particularly during the odd scuffle. The character models, though commendably accurate, also suffer from some slightly odd voice-acting. Ruffians will carry on boldly insulting your lack of fighting prowess, for example, while they're being punched in the face repeatedly, and the main characters sound like nothing so much as drunken versions of their originals. Even Jack Sparrow sounds slightly more wasted.

The graphics are in one sense a trump card, looking good even by the current generation's standards. But the second the game starts moving, much of the craft put into *At World's End* goes out of the window: you're happily running through a level, and slowdown rears its ugly, archaic head. This kind of technical hitch is something even mediocre PlayStation 2 releases manage to avoid nowadays.

The game does feature some set-pieces, such as a ship-to-ship battle with Davy Jones and a fight with a kraken. But compared to *God Of War*'s hydra, for example, the simplistic tentacle-tugging here makes the monsters seem almost tame. And that kind of comparison will always be misleading: as usual with games of this ilk, fans of the franchise will tolerate the shortcomings for the chance to play as a favourite character or battle through a favourite scene. But anyone simply after jolly swashbuckling would do far better to look out for the re-release of *Sid Meier's Pirates!* Ultimately, the biggest problem with *At World's End* would shame Jack Sparrow himself: it's boring, nondescript and significantly lacking in adventure. **[3]**



The combat system has a reasonable number of counters and special attacks, but when divided amongst the thousands of enemies you'll face, they quickly begin repeating. Along with some occasionally clumsy collision detection, it's a recipe for an annoying and repetitive experience



The character models have an admirable likeness to their cinematic counterparts, but the game's visual flair tends to be in these details, and not the overall surroundings





The set-pieces add some diversity to the standard adventure plodding, but their implementation next to some of gaming's best recent efforts is poor. Actions such as climbing (left) require only perfunctory controls, with only a beam-balancing trick, that recurs with monotonous regularity, the only use of the Sixaxis' motion sensing

Living on the edge



The environment in *At World's End* turns out to be a bit of mutton dressed as lamb: unbelievably, falling into the water during town sections will kill your pirate, and while certain sections of the levels are context-sensitive in combat, the vast majority have no impact on animations whatsoever, be they walls or sheer drops. That extends to the interactive sections, which frequently demand little more than pressing a button and then a direction, or following a series of prompts.

Perhaps the vocabulary of the text commands belie the thinking behind the game: rather than asking you to use a particular item, you'll be asked to 'interact with a barrel of pitch'. Interaction, interaction, interaction: it's the nature of gaming, but simply saying that something is there doesn't mean it actually is.



MERCURY MELTDOWN REVOLUTION

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: £40
RELEASE: JUNE 8 PUBLISHER: ATARI
DEVELOPER: IGNITION PREVIOUSLY IN: E174

So solid



Your globule of mercury is extremely malleable and will pass through many states as you wobble your way through each lab. Many puzzles are colour-based, and involve splitting the element and dying each separate portion a different colour to pass through coded gates, or melding varying blobs to achieve an entirely new tint. You can even alter the temperature of your mercury, resulting in fresh physical properties. For instance, heat makes the blob flow more quickly and split more easily, while cold turns it into a harder, more solid sphere.

Given that *Mercury* was originally envisaged to work alongside the unreleased motion-sensing technology envisaged for Sony's PSP, it seems ironic that this superior puzzle series should finally find its true home on a piece of Nintendo hardware. And it really is an epiphany; after *Revolution*, *Mercury* almost seems redundant on any other format.

Sensibly eschewing *Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz*'s ill-advised 'pointer' control scheme in favour of grasping the Remote horizontally in both hands, you'll feel like a master neurosurgeon as you delicately guide the titular element around a network of labyrinths. It's hard not to appreciate the sense of near-pixel-perfect locomotion the Wii conveys when utilised to its full potential, an area that seemed so disconcertingly unrefined in the days of *Rayman Raving Rabbids* and *Call Of Duty 3*. Even the camera, a traditional bind when such lofty levels of precision are required, is reasonably intuitive, though learning to zoom in and out and rotate though 180 degrees while maintaining full control over your fragile globule remains consistently challenging.



The Shove minigame – like curling, possibly mixed with a bit of bowls – involves edging your little blob of liquid metal delicately toward the centre of the target, with the intention of getting it closer to the bullseye than your rival does

Revolution's refined controls not only make securing rapid times throughout initial labs markedly easier than its PSP brethren, but also allow fiendish later missions to be navigated with markedly less frustration. Which is just as well, considering *Meltdown*'s day-glo colours and pseudo cel-shading mask a mischievously complex game, requiring intelligence, skill and nerves of steel.

Certain concessions do seem to have been made during *Meltdown*'s transition to the Wii, most notably the juggling of certain stage orders with the more casual gamer in mind. Initially *Revolution* will barely test the greenest navigators of the silver blob, but by the time you've mastered the broader nuances and reached the Atom Lab, even *Mercury* veterans will feel the strain. While certain stages might lead to the odd grey cell meltdown, generally *Revolution* is one of those rare successes where the tight controls and deft physics mean you'll attribute those occasional heart-rending mistakes to user error rather than sloppy programming.

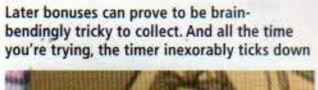
It speaks volumes for the game's appeal and intelligent level design that you'll undoubtedly return to mop up hitherto unreached bonuses, improve old times and salvage as much mercury as possible. To this end, it's a shame Ignition failed to include an online leaderboard, and also that two player can't compete head to head in the main campaign. These are things a future edition will hopefully rectify.

But there's no question that *Meltdown* is a success, its undoubted charms and occasionally inspired level design rendering it deserving of both critical and commercial recognition. It might not be a system seller, but provides further compelling evidence of the Wii controller's lofty potential. [8]





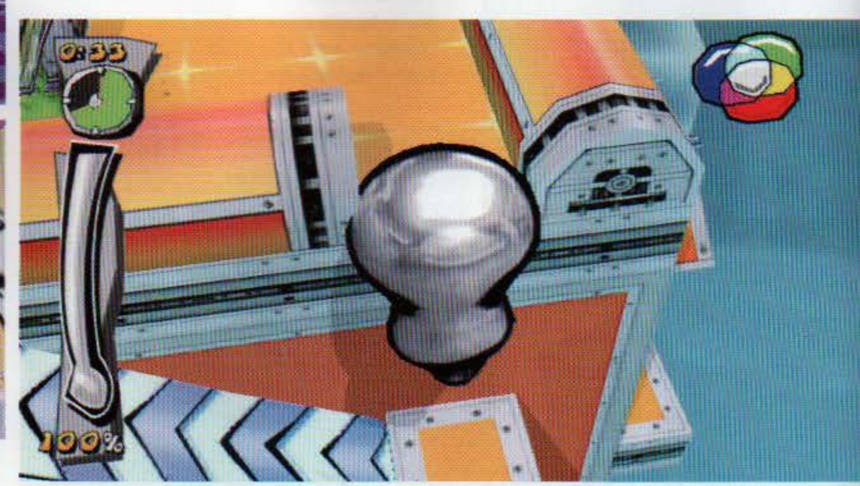
The party games are diverting enough, but it's a pity the use traditional controls instead of Wii-specific gestures – a baffling decision when the Remote does the job so we



Later bonuses can prove to be brain-bendingly tricky to collect. And all the time you're trying, the timer inexorably ticks down



Freezing your mercury and imbuing it with pinball-like properties often ramps the speed of levels up several notches, as well as preventing it from dripping and flowing through gaps it otherwise would





CRUSH

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: KUJU
PREVIOUSLY IN: E174



The levels wouldn't pose much of a problem for Mario, but Danny has the jumping ability of the average 20-something sicknote in a dressing gown: attempting feats of agility won't get you far in the world of *Crush*

The story of *Crush* revolves around Danny, an insomniac trying to get to the bottom of his problem, and Dr Reubens, who has an unconventional method of help. This is the CRUSH system: Cognitive Regression Utilising pSychiatric Heuristics, according to Dr Reubens, who informs the pedants among us that he is a scientist and not an English teacher. In practical terms, the CRUSH system allows you to crush a 3D representation of the levels into 2D, from one of four sides or top-down, by stamping your foot and bringing far-off platforms alongside you or high ledges down to your level. It's an interesting tool, and the application has the essential puzzler quality of offering ultimately simple, but complex-looking, solutions.

The game is all about the levels themselves: intricate Russian dolls composed of several different blocks, balls and cogs that, depending on the direction you choose to crush from, can have several different functions. There's no denying the appeal of moving great distances and impossible heights in a 3D world through manipulating it in 2D, and it quickly becomes second nature to crush and uncrush through or past any obstacles. Block types range from crumblers to infinitely thin ledges that only become navigable in 2D, and several of the tricks you can pull – such as crushing cockroaches on impassable blocks – never get tired. As well as objects and enemies, each level also contains a number of marbles (geddit?) that Danny must find before the



The intricate design of *Crush*'s levels is obvious, and the game lets you zoom out for this kind of angle at any point. Some perspective is needed, however: the green blocks will prove impassable in 2D, and always need to be worked around

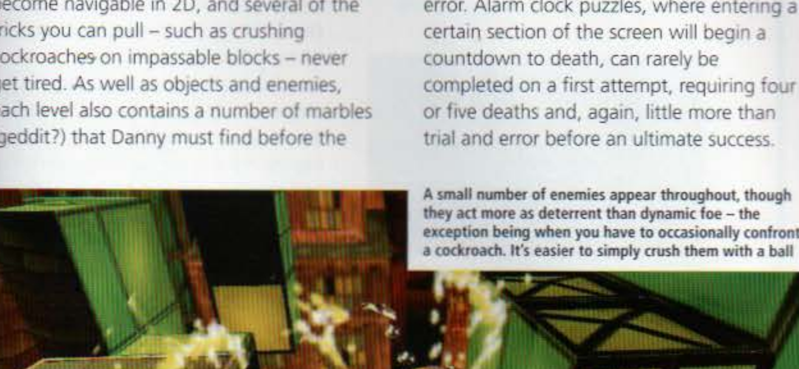
exit opens up: you can then choose to head straight out or try to find bonus items that unlock level themes and trophy runs.

But there are some problems. Primary among these are some of the later levels, where the 2D/3D switches demanded are so well-hidden that they can occasionally seem less like difficult logic than difficult trial-and-error. Alarm clock puzzles, where entering a certain section of the screen will begin a countdown to death, can rarely be completed on a first attempt, requiring four or five deaths and, again, little more than trial and error before an ultimate success.



And as the game progresses and elements such as cogs and ability blocks are added to the simple mix of platforms and the odd boulder, it can seem like too many ingredients. A great puzzle game must have simple and clear rules as well as logic on gimbals and, very occasionally, *Crush* falls short of delivering that.

Overall, *Crush* is an enjoyably unique experience. There are a good amount of levels to puzzle through, and the trophy mode (in which you have a time limit and limited crushes within previously completed levels) proves surprisingly compulsive. The game is full of charm, from the easily-distinguishable block types and hero in a dressing gown, to the sequences that detail the game's story and a delicate hint mode. The PSP's software catalogue doesn't only suffer from a lack of original titles, it also suffers from a lack of originality. So whichever angle you're coming from, *Crush* is a step in the right direction. **[7]**





A small number of enemies appear throughout, though they act more as deterrent than dynamic foe – the exception being when you have to occasionally confront a cockroach. It's easier to simply crush them with a ball





The visual switch between 3D and 2D is a great trick, and it quickly becomes natural to see the world in front of you in terms of side-on (above) or top-down (below left) puzzles

Mode seven



Following Kuju Entertainment's sale in January to the investment group Catalis, the Brighton studio responsible for *Crush* has been rebranded as Zoë Mode. Rather than being a simple game developer, the studio is now represented as a young woman sticking out her tongue and telling as all to 'try to keep up'. And it's getting difficult to keep up with all of the marketing ideas thrown at games, since there are so many of them.

Whether this chicanery fools anyone remains to be seen. According to Ed Daly, the studio head: "She is an open-minded and social person who likes parties, music and games", which at least fits in with the studio's past work for EyeToy and in the *SingStar* series. But it does seem to fix Zoë Mode's future output, and further original titles in the mould of *Crush* may be unlikely.

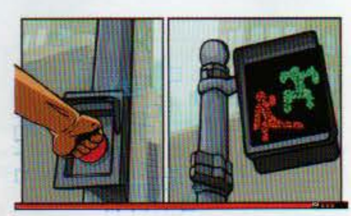


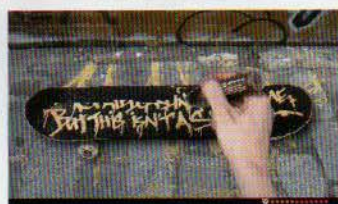
HOT PXL

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ATARI DEVELOPER: ZSLIDE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E166

It's impossible not to gaze at Atari's garish *Hot Pxl* without seeing the bulk of its inspiration. A similar minigame-rammed time-killer, made famous with Nintendo charm and an eccentric, lightning-bolt-moustached villain, is what springs to mind. *WarioWare* has for so long been the perfect example of short, quick-play gaming at its best, offering up a healthy mix of intriguing visuals, retro nostalgia and addictive fun, while relying heavily on Nintendo's hardware innovations and user interface for contemporary play. Enter *Hot Pxl* and the PSP. Devoid of any screen touching, tilting, shaking or pointing, in this format the concept plays out in an unfortunately much more limited manner.

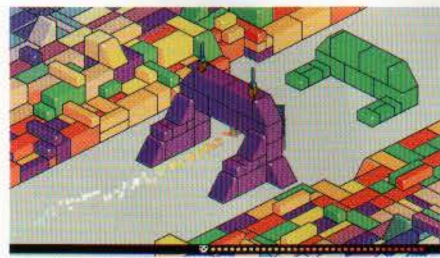
The idea is simple. Bombard the player with literally hundreds of minigames (each lasting no longer than eight seconds) in quick succession, before offering up a boss battle to unlock progress on to the next set of 'so urban it hurts' themed collections of games. These range from the highly addictive, brilliantly stylish coloured-block-collecting games of dodgeball, to the downright absurd and, frankly, cheap-looking ridiculousness of 'Photoshopping' zits from a teenager's face. It's all a bit hit and miss, and with over 200 games on offer, most are either tiresome and bland or so painfully difficult (thanks to a violently unpredictable difficulty curve) that the PSP is switched off before another enjoyable one shows itself – and even then it's all over in seconds. For the most part, the minigames making up the bulk of *Hot Pxl*'s repertoire simply don't capture your attention enough. The PSP's control interface leads many of the games to be merely dressed-up clones of each other, which is something of a surprise given Atari's library of classic games that could have been called upon for the task, and leaves the player feeling short changed.

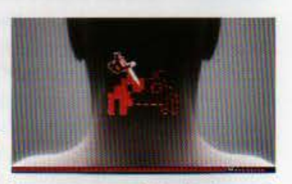




For all the variety in themes as you hop from one game to the next, it sadly doesn't transfer across to gameplay. Many games play the same way as others, with no more than a new coat of paint

In keeping with the quick-fix, toy-like nature of the game is the inclusion of *Hot Pxl*'s 'buddy screens'. Essentially interactive screensavers, these allow you to interact with your PSP in a variety of peculiar ways as they turn it into a virtual skateboard, spray can or fizzy drink. Once selected, the various face buttons will create themed effects and sounds based around your choice. It's a bizarre inclusion, and a novel one, but you can't help but feel that if zSlide wants to directly compete with some of *WarioWare*'s creativity, not toying with the PSP's optional camera or microphone has been a missed opportunity. **[4]**







Far too few of the minigames on offer have any real visual flair, opting for a tackier substitute to the clean, stylish aesthetics of the one pictured above. There are some great looking games hidden away, but you'll notice them far less than the ugly ones



DRIVER '76

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: SUMO DIGITAL



Since 1998, the *Driver* games have been synonymous with gamer frustration and over-ambition. Reflections may have beaten Rockstar to the fully-roaming 3D punch (on PS1, no less) but its games have always lacked the wit, technology and game-craft to go the distance. Last year saw the brand and technology being sold to Ubisoft off the back of disappointing sales for the last instalment, *Parallel Lines*. After some tinkering in the garage to fix the mistakes made by its previous one 'careful' owner, *Driver '76* is ready to go out on the streets.

While Atari was often keen to turn a blind eye to the previous games' faults in order to rush them out onto the shelves, conversion specialist Sumo Digital has attempted to really get into the guts of the *Driver* engine, giving the series a full refit for its PSP debut. The rear-end-heavy muscle car handling that the series is known for has been softened considerably, for example, with the balance between fun slides around corners and near-constant 180° spins finally getting nailed conclusively. Attempts to reduce road rage incidents have been successful across the board, with motorbikes becoming uncharacteristically stable, the car-tailing elastic band stretching further than ever before, and the police presence staying just the right side of Blues Brothers – exciting, yet not impossible to shake.





Plot-wise, *Driver '76* is a prequel to *Parallel Lines*, but doesn't do anything clever with timelines, sticking to the year of the title. The story sees you trying to woo the daughter of a gang boss

Even the on-foot shooting sections that were a problem in earlier games are fun, although the entire game's body count barely hits double figures. In fact, the only moments at which *Driver '76* fails to convince is in the *Chase HQ II: Special Crime Investigation*-style vehicular shooting sequences. They require you to hold the left shoulder button to aim, and use the right to fire, while accelerating and steering at the same time, which can cause painful hand cramp.

Unfortunately, creating such a smooth ride has resulted in a title you can race through in just a single charge of your PSP battery, although there are a further 50 side-missions in addition to the 27 story episodes. And while Sumo may have managed to get rid of the series' clunkier aspects, and made it a little more palatable to the modern gamer, this is little more than a slick tune-up of an eight-year-old banger. **[7**



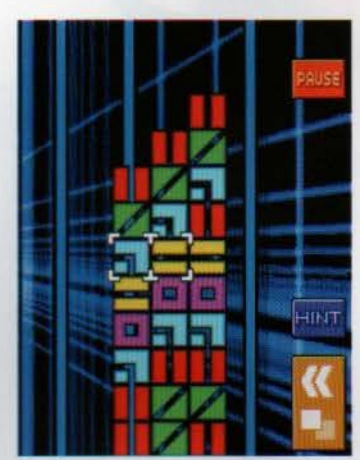


PANEL DE PON DS

FORMAT: DS PRICE: ¥3,800 (£16) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), JUNE (US), TBA (UK) PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

Whether you know it as *Tetris Attack*, *Panel De Pon* or *Pokémon Puzzle League* (the tradition drawn upon for the upcoming US release of this DS version, which will be called *Planet Puzzle League*), Intelligent Systems' version of the classic match-three game, which asks you to switch blocks horizontally, has long been on millions of fans' DS wishlist. The stylus input seemed perfectly made for the quick-fire block-swapping the game requires, and its wifi capabilities seemed a perfect host for the vicious multiplayer battles the series always produced.

And, simply put, they were right. As with *Picross* (see right), the old tradition of D-pad input now seems like a rather ridiculous fudge. Where stylus input in *Meteos* gave rise to the rather inelegant 'scrubbing' technique (after desperate players found that scribbling frantically at the screen could often produce a fluke victory), and where in *Mr Driller's* DS outing it couldn't quite match the precision of button control, in *Panel De Pon* it speeds and streamlines play. No longer requiring you to commute your cursor step-by-step around the screen, it allows you to hop directly to the next block you want to move. And the game encourages this fast, flexible mode of play, offering you the option of tip-offs about potential chain reactions. It's well worth leaving these on, at least initially, as they act as an extremely effective tutorial to *Panel De Pon's* considerable strategic depths.



The puzzle mode, which asks you to clear a screen in a tightly limited number of moves, remains a hidden strength. Many puzzles may be familiar, but their solutions will be long forgotten

And that strategy becomes deeper in multiplayer, where marshalling your own power-up blocks, and raining a continuous storm of harmful blocks on your opponents, becomes a savage and desperate tug of war.

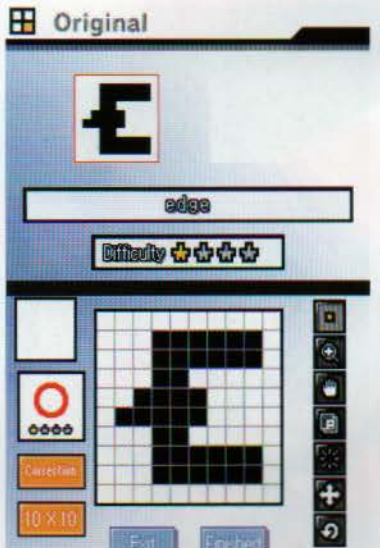
This is, of course, a game whose mechanics were perfected at launch, so there's little real improvement there. But the generosity of the package – marathon modes, time attacks, puzzle modes, versus computer, local competitive play, online play, extra skins, etc – means that there's very little to criticise. Offering the quiet contemplation of a puzzle mode, the soothing time-wasting of a marathon session, or the frenetic rivalry of multiplayer: this has it all. **[8]**

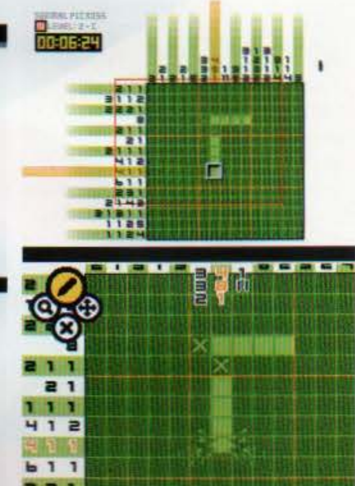




PICROSS DS

FORMAT: DS PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: JUPITER





The level editor mode (left) is slick and absorbing, and the main game (above) offers a variety of simple skins to customise your game

Born the same year as *Panel De Pon* (1985), it's perhaps most appropriate to think of *Picross* as a precursor to sudoku. The puzzles have made the same journey from magazines to videogames, and share the same soothing logic of filling squares and finding patterns. The clues for each line tell you the distribution, but not the placement of the blocks, and unlocking the whole puzzle is a simple but absorbing process of reasoning of which Sherlock Holmes would be proud: eliminate the blank squares and you're left with the ones that must be filled. There's no excuse for error, no room for guesswork, and no opponent but the clock. It's a test which asks you to balance a methodical approach with speed-conscious strategies.

And, as with *Panel De Pon*, Jupiter has effortlessly optimised that challenge for DS, and has fleshed out its bare bones with an embarrassment of modes, features and options. A smooth automatic zoom function, rather reminiscent of the one *Brain Training* uses for sudoku, allows for easy handling of larger puzzles, and input can be handled either purely by stylus – where you tap to switch its function from a navigating grab-and-drag tool to a block marker or space marker – or by modifying the stylus behaviour by holding different directions on the D-pad. The latter is the quicker option, allowing you, in later levels, to reach that trance state where your hands can input the right moves faster than your brain can consciously choose them.

Nor does the *Brain Training* influence stop there. A daily play mode offers the now familiar possibility of tracking your cerebral growth through a calendar-based graph, and the more you play, the more variations you unlock of the ruleset – like not being able to mark squares as definite blanks. The stylus is also put to good use in the level editor, where creating both the *Picross* puzzles, and the pictures they reveal when solved, can prove a welcome relief from the rigours of the main game. User-created puzzles can be shared over wifi, and new official puzzles are available to download from Nintendo.

There may still be enormous room for innovation in the rest of the DS's catalogue, but it's impossible to ignore the fact that, with titles like this, Nintendo has perfected a genre. Presented with a classy anonymity guaranteed not to alienate, complete with a well-judged difficulty curve and exemplary tutorials and hints for beginners, as well as enough features to satisfy block-addled experts, this is masterclass software design. **[8]**


SPACE CHANNEL 5 Part 2

TIME EXTEND

SPACE CHANNEL 5: PART 2

FORMAT: **DC, PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (UNITED GAME ARTISTS)**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE DATE: **2002**



How hot rhythm and high camp came together to perfectly express Sega's magical difference

Games are often condemned for being cases of style over substance. But as a criticism of an artistic endeavour, could this have any validity? Can style, sometimes, create substance?

Such accusations are usually levelled at those games that feature a relatively basic form of player interaction plus a vivid and unique aesthetic treatment. And that's why it's a meaningless statement: among other things, videogames are a visual art, so the way they look is critically important in defining how their players derive interaction and meaning from them.

If you're looking for an example of how you can take a remarkably simple gameplay formula and fashion something from it that has both huge variety and a unique sense of identity, forged by a solidly coherent stylistic focus, you can't get much better than *Space Channel 5: Part 2*. One of the last hurrahs of Tetsuya Mizuguchi's United Game Artists – before he departed Sega and the remnants of the group were swallowed up by Sonic Team – it remains perhaps his most human title.

At its core, it's a remake of the original *SC5*. The same simple gameplay concept – a videogame version of MB Games' Simon, made rhythmic – the same world and set of characters, levels that are at least thematically similar. Take a step back, though, and this sequel makes the first game look like nothing more than a proof of concept, a rushed and unfinished first draft. Fuzzy and uninteresting pre-rendered backgrounds, a near-fatal animation-based timing flaw, a soundtrack with a severe lack of variety, numerous missed opportunities (see 'Beat it'): all problems within the original game, and all fixed in the sequel.

SC5P2 is one of the best examples of what's become seen as the 'Sega difference' – the quality that's so often referenced in the press and by fans, but so seldom defined. Blue skies, white clouds – those are the elements most commonly referred to. Clearly, though, that's not it – it's not just a matter of how the skybox is coloured. *SC5P2* is everything that was great about Sega at the peak of the company's creative high. Character, optimism, good times. No cynicism, no irony. Just an uplifting sense of the goodness in people. Games with heart. Games with inimitable style.

How many other games place you in a world like this? A retrotastic space age, spinning off from a point in time where the 1960s didn't turn bad, where LSD was replaced by MDMA, the doctrine of free love by one of free groove, where Altamont never happened and Burt Bacharach invented house music and hip hop. Mike Flowers in a glass-domed helmet with an oxygen tank strapped to his back. The Jetsons discovering crotchless leather chaps.





BEAT IT

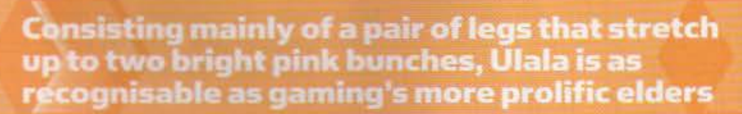
Though present in both of the *SC5* games, it's only in *Part 2* that UGA made proper use of Michael Jackson. In the original his influence was limited to a couple of sampled 'ooh's and a ten-second alteration in Ulala's animation should the player successfully rescue him. But his rescue second time around is given an entire sequence all of its own, the soundtrack paying homage to his early solo career while also bringing it in line with more current takes on the same sound. It's almost Michael Jackson doing Justin Timberlake doing Michael Jackson and, as such, can't fail to make your body move in time with the beat. Idealised and boiled down to the best of his constituent parts as he is within the game, this is Jackson as he'd perhaps have been had he not gone right off the deep end shortly after Thriller's success: Jackson as he sees himself combined with Jackson as asexual beat-borne space being.

It's high camp space opera. If you were to take Barbarella and replace that film's preoccupation with sex for one with dance, you'd be part of the way towards describing the *SC5* universe. It feels immediately familiar, like you've seen it in a thousand other places, but when you try and nail it down to being a copycat of something specific, you can't. It's a truly unique setting, not just in videogames, but in any medium.

But a game's setting is as nothing without a main character to give it life. Enter Ulala (the clue's in the pronunciation). Her design, like that of all the best characters – and rarely for a female starring role – is immediately identifiable and unique, especially for being introduced at a time when *Tomb Raider* was still big news. Consisting mainly of a pair of legs that stretch up to two bright pink bunches and an uncommonly slender frame, hers is a silhouette as recognisable as those of any of gaming's more respected or prolific elders. She's the embodiment of the Sega difference – upbeat, sassy and on the side of the angels, but never wide-eyed or naïve.

And this character infuses the rest of the game world's population. Some are returning members of the original game's cast list – say hello again to Space Kung-Fu Man, the channel's newsreaders, the Morolians, Mr Blank, the schoolkids – some (including all of the bad guys) are new introductions, but all have the same vibrancy and life. And camp? Sailors, air hostesses, opera singers, cheerleaders, synchronised swimmers – no other game has a character list that comes close to matching that of *Part 2*.

As a rhythm action title, the music is of prime importance. One of the disappointments of the first game was that its soundtrack didn't last the distance – Mexican Flyer, plus a bunch of tracks 'inspired' by Mexican Flyer. Just as the visual treatment of *Part 2* is a whole polygon revolution away from the flat and bland video backdrops of the first game, so too is the soundtrack given new breadth and depth.

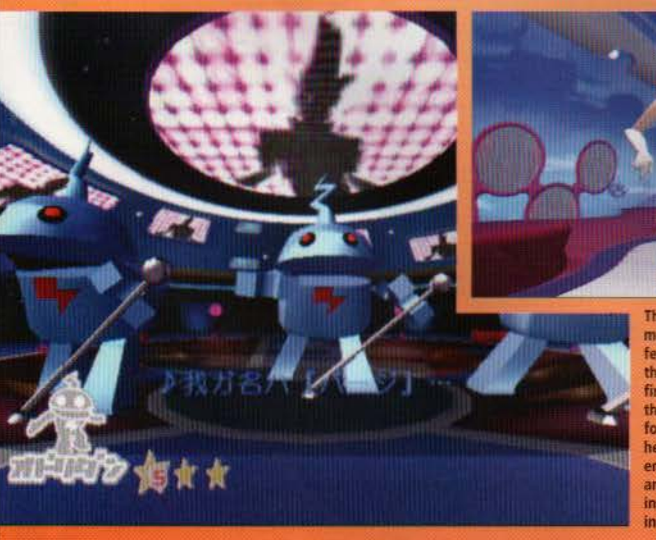


Consisting mainly of a pair of legs that stretch up to two bright pink bunches, Ulala is as recognisable as gaming's more prolific elders

It's variety in the music that keeps things fresh throughout *Part 2*, making it an electrifying experience through to the end credits and beyond. Jumping styles and time signatures with each new set-piece that the game throws Ulala into, the music complements and inspires even more bizarre scenes as it progresses, yet manages to segue from one to the next without you ever noticing the switch. One minute you'll be tasked with rescuing an opera singer and her entourage of bird trainers (or, in the unlockable alternate version of the level – all of which are even more deranged than the regular versions – her entourage of dog trainers) from attacking water lilies, the next you'll be engaged in a waltz battle against a giant plant's sentient, white and pink turdbot, the camera framing the scen like it's some kind of hypertechnicolo movie take on a West End musical.

The variation in music also allowe UGA to mix up the gameplay in a wa that it was unable to before. Most of the levels on offer provide at least on instrument battle, where the controls are stripped back even further in order to encourage ever more complex rhythms from the players' fingertips. The 'chu' and 'hey' button remain, but the D-pad is now limited to a single command, that of playing whichever instrument the scene is currently focused on. The four directions all perform the same actio the only difference being in the animation – another touch that's present for purely stylistic reasons.

With the combination of the visuals and the music comes the game's killer blow: the direction. This is a choreographer's game, through and through. The character animatio is always snappy and enlivening, ever when you've performed poorly in a section and Ulala and her followers are wearily swaying from side to side heads hung low. Unlike in the first game, the range of dance styles on display seems to be endless and is the key to connecting the player with the world on the screen. The characters feel alive, improvising moves as your own performance improves their interaction with the rhythm.



The first level is strangely muted and uncertain, as if feeling its way back into the groove. By the time the first boss is upon you, both the game and its star have found their stride. From here on in, the music, environments, characters and outfits are on an inexorable climb toward an intergalactic poptastic end



Replacing the soft-edged, spongy Morolians as the foot-troops of the game's Big Bad, the retro-futuristic enemy designs of the sequel are representative of its increased attention to detail and closer relationship with the funk

Complementing the wonderful animation is the framing of the action. The use of full motion video backgrounds in the first game limited the amount of cutting between different angles that was possible (and also had the effect of making the cuts that were present look tatty with the FMV loading slightly too late). With the benefit of fully 3D environments, *Part 2*'s camera work becomes significantly more dynamic, for all the world looking like a full-on Hollywood musical, itself cut to the rhythm. It's another aspect of the game that pulls the player into its universe, allows them to become one with the beat.

So, a game where the style doesn't just complement the gameplay, it makes it. The style makes you fall in love with the rhythm, and it makes you feel and appreciate that rhythm. *SC5P2*'s is a world in which music and dance save the day, time after time. It's a game in which the characters are given real humanity through the reinforcement, on all levels, of its pacifist manifesto – nobody dies, nobody is physically harmed.

Its defining moment comes right at the end: Dance Dimension X, a planet-sized, vogueing, pastel blue genie of pure groove energy, Ulala collapsing and being brought back to the light by 86,429 kidnapped souls cheering her on and the most uplifting crescendo you'll probably ever experience in gaming. It's not often that a videogame makes the hair on the back of your neck stand on end – it's a testament to Mizuguchi's belief in the potential that music within games has to evoke unexpected emotions that the finale isn't the only place in *Part 2* in which you'll find it happening.

This barely-appreciated release – the DC version of which never made it out of Japan, the PS2 version of which was granted woefully limited distribution in Europe, so much so that it's becoming increasingly difficult to source a copy – does that and more. It's a compact demonstration of the magic that Sega was capable of at its best. Alongside pin-sharp gameplay and unbeatable style, it has heart and compassion.

ONE STEP BEYOND

When viewed in the character list, certain rescued hostages will tell you of otherwise unmarked points within each level where hitting the 'chu' attack at the correct time will add to your overall score for that level. A design decision clearly intended to increase longevity, its suitability within a game like this is open to question. As all decent bemani games feature endless amounts of replayability anyway, the enjoyment coming from interacting with the music more than traditional elements of gameplay, it's an unnecessary addition to an otherwise successfully self-explanatory ruleset. Most players will likely find themselves settling for scores below 100 per cent, rather than failing because they missed the very last hidden beat in a level yet again.









A reaction-test duck-shoot, a frantic drum battle, a vaguely sexual encounter with Audrey II's sister and an ensemble dance-off to rescue an air hostess – *SC5P2*'s strength is throwing the player into an endless procession of bizarre set-pieces without ever breaking the effortless flow



THE MAKING OF... SONIC X-TREME

The unreleased first attempt to send the hedgehog into the third dimension epitomised Sega's troubled journey from the 16bit world

FORMAT: **SATURN** PUBLISHER: **SEGA** DEVELOPER: **STI** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE DATE: **N/A**



The Saturn was as famous for its lack of a proper, exclusive Sonic title (off-shoot *Sonic R* notwithstanding) as the Mega Drive was for having perhaps too many. But Sega never intended for the Saturn to lack the company's mascot. The story of how the speedy blue hedgehog with the red shoes never found a proper home on Sega's 32bit machine is one of indecision, conflict and confusion – problems that threatened to tear its internal development divisions apart.

The lack of any binding vision for the game, or even a set console for it to play on, doomed *Sonic X-Treme* from its very inception. It was a situation that *Sonic X-Treme's* eventual designer, **Christian Senn**, still sounds frustrated about: "We had a company that couldn't decide what platform the game should be developed for. Should it be Genesis? Saturn? No, wait – the new secret Mars 32X system! No, wait – nVidia, Saturn, PC..."

Sonic X-Treme was a fitting symbol for a company that at the time was at stuck in an uneasy transition period. Developed at Sega Technical Institute, Sega's America-based development division, the game was bounced around like a pinball from system to system, business plan to business plan. And its basic design, based almost entirely around Sonic's past successes, simply wasn't working too well.

"The theme of the game was to take basic *Sonic* [2D side scrolling] and add the ability to have him go into and out of the screen," recalls the game's producer, **Mike Wallis**. "On paper that sounded great, but when we actually started to implement it, the addition created some design challenges we didn't initially account for." Console 3D graphics were in their infancy, and developers had much to learn about their effects on controls and game mechanics.

But even without considering the difficulties of working in 3D, Senn is uncertain that the project could ever have succeeded. "It wouldn't be a stretch to assume it was doomed from the beginning," he admits. His team had never worked together before, and suffered from lack of experience. "The first *Sonic* games [from *Sonic 2* onwards] had been created almost exclusively by Japanese team members led by Yuji Naka, but we were a totally separate group across the hall," he explains. "This set up seeds of doubt and a political landmine waiting to go off if we didn't produce amazing results quickly. It truly was a project where anything that could have gone wrong, did."

"It wouldn't be a stretch to assume it was doomed from the beginning. It was a project where anything that could go wrong, did"

The team underwent frequent changes, and was cursed by inner conflict. Lead programmer Don Goddard was replaced with **Ofer Alon**, a decision that the former team members still disagree upon. Alon's focus on programming for the PC with intent to port to the Saturn may have made sense in the light of Sega's capricious approach to hardware, but when it came to porting, the team found it ran cripplingly slowly. Some members also claim Alon could be hard to work with and reluctant to show them how he was progressing.

Senn has a different opinion, perhaps because he was the only



one to regularly see Alon's work, maintaining that it was never appreciated. "I remember the day [Sega of Japan president] Hayao Nakayama came to Sega Technical Institute to check on our progress," he says. "By this time, the team had split into two distinct groups, both working on *Sonic X-treme* but not on the same version."

One group, composed of Alon and Senn, continued development of the engine, the editor and levels on the PC with the intention to port to the Saturn. The other group, Team Condor, was led by Robert Morgan and comprised everyone else. They used an old version of Alon's editor to port directly to the Saturn. "Ofer and I planned to unveil our version when Nakayama-san came to see the Condor Team's efforts," Senn continues. "We missed our chance, though, when Nakayama-san came storming out practically cursing after seeing what they'd done."

Videos currently circulating around YouTube may justify Senn's claim, although how well the code this footage shows would have eventually ported to the Saturn will probably never be known. After his visit, Nakayama ruled that the one part of the game he liked – the boss engine developed by Chris Coffin – was to become the base tech for the game.

Such divisions within STI presented enough difficulties for the project, but the difficult relationship between Sega Of America and its Japanese parent didn't help. Bernie Stolar had just moved from Sony to take over Sega Of America, and Wallis clearly remembers his desire to get the mascot character on to the Saturn in time for the Christmas of 1996. He allocated a specialised team to the project and asked what they needed to get it out in time. "I told him the team felt that with the *Nights* engine and development tools we'd have a much better shot of achieving our goal," says Wallis. "He said to consider it done."

The team then spent a period familiarising itself with the new engine, but the relief was short-lived: "After two or three weeks, Stolar came in and told us that we had to stop using the *Nights* engine, that Sega Of Japan was changing its mind and that we would have to go back to using our [Coffin's] own tech." Wallis spoke to Stolar to find out what was behind the change of heart: "He told me that Yuji Naka had threatened to quit if Japan allowed us to use his technology to create a Sonic game."

With *Sonic X-treme*'s team still divided, lacking in time and with no solid tech to run their game on, the future of *X-treme* looked more and more bleak. While the Condor Team continued its development with Coffin's engine, Senn and Alon also persevered with their PC development.

"We had to stop using the Nights engine... Yuji Naka had threatened to quit if Sega of Japan allowed us to use his technology to create a Sonic game"

GOGGLE EYES

Many of the screens released during *Sonic X-Treme*'s development show a distorted, 'fish-eye' camera perspective. "The fish-eye camera lens came about as a solution to a number of gameplay-related problems in Ofer's engine," says Senn. The effect visually wrapped the playfield over a sphere so players could see much further around Sonic in the centre. "This made platform jumping, avoiding obstacles, targeting enemies and overall awareness of Sonic's surroundings increase dramatically," Senn continues. "The fish-eye appeared to some as a mere gimmick, but it was in fact a very elegant solution to some real gameplay issues."

Tiara Boobowski (left) and her father were keepers of six magical rings Robotnik had his eye on, calling on Sonic to save the day. Recurring villain Mecha Sonic, who would turn up on the Saturn in *Sonic R*, was also set to appear

Using Ofer Alon's level editor, Chris Senn designed Jade Gully, seen here (left), in a mere week, including layout, textures and enemies. However, the editing tool came a little too late. Says Senn: "Ironically, we ended up with an amazing tool just in time for management to can the game!"

Enemy Designs Phase 1

Doodle and Play

Sonic Demo 1 Flying Enemy

Sonic Demo 1 Tri-Drill Enemy

Senn still believes that Ofer had produced an engine robust enough to build the game on. "I estimate another six to 12 weeks and even the two of us could have finished a game together using the assets we already had and any new ones needed," he says, ruefully.

Development for the Saturn version fared no better. It all hinged on Coffin, who Wallis remembers working inhumane hours trying to get it finished. "Coffin actually left his apartment, cancelling its lease, moved all his belongings into the office, and worked day and night," he says. Illness, however, took Coffin out, bringing Sega Of America's great hope of having a fully 3D *Sonic* title for the Saturn down too. "The guy was a human dynamo," says Wallis. "He literally worked himself into the ground, which was unfortunate, because without Coffin the project had zero chance of being released in time for Christmas."

Wallis had little choice but to inform Stolar that they wouldn't be able to meet deadline. A backup plan was revealed in the form of the Saturn port of *Sonic 3D*, which Wallis was given the opportunity to produce, and the plug was finally pulled on *Sonic X-Treme* in early 1997.

Now a black sheep in Sega's past, it will never be known whether a game worth the pain that went into producing it might have come out of this poorly conceived project. It's difficult not to wonder what impact it might have had, and what differences it could have caused to the Sonic titles that followed. Some of the initial designs did have promise, such the plan to use analogue control, something now a given in a 3D platformer.

Mario may have become the unquestioned platforming king of the era, but Wallis is content to close with one last, bold claim: "How would *X-treme* have done against *Mario 64*? Hard to say, but it definitely would have been competitive."

REBIRTH

Sega might have given up on *Sonic X-Treme* a long time ago, but fan interest has nonetheless remained strong. The internet is home to much fan art and speculation on its story, leaked videos populate YouTube, and discussion groups are still active. This may have something to do with Senn's grim determination to see it given some kind of eventual release. In what's currently known as Project-S, he's helping fans to work on a version of it, organising them and providing suggestions to help ensure quality.



Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

NAME: Radical Entertainment

DATE FOUNDED: 1991

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 230

KEY STAFF: Tim Bennison, Kirsten Forbes, Dave Fracchia, Ken Rosman, Leah Rubin, Liezel Sinclair, Stephen van der Mescht, Cam Weber, Kelly Zmak



URL: www.radical.ca

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
The Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction, Crash Tag Team Racing, Scarface: The World Is Yours







Radical has developed a diverse portfolio of games, ranging from cartoon racers to stylishly violent gangster epics and lurid green superhero brawlers





LOCATION: Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

CURRENT PROJECTS: *Crash Of The Titans*, plus two unannounced licensed projects and one unannounced original IP

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"Established in 1991, Radical Entertainment has grown to become one of North America's largest developers of interactive entertainment. The studio is located in Vancouver, BC, voted as one of the most beautiful cities in the world and one of the most desirable places to live. Radical's 50,000 square foot facility is one part studio, one part campus, one part playground – a reflection of our company's work ethic and culture that inspires great games, continuous learning and having fun!

"Radical's employees are irrefutably its greatest asset, comprising over 230 diverse creative, technical and business people. Speciality areas include Radical's multi-genre, multi-platform game engine, unique game development processes, real-time physics/animation hybrid simulation, character creation, story and game design, computer-human interaction and usability. Now part of Vivendi Games, Radical continues to develop established licences as well as new original intellectual property for all current generation platforms.

"Radical's culture focuses on providing our employees a variety of in-house programs, courses and material to allow them to own their careers and continue to grow, ultimately encouraging a work-life balance. In 2007 Radical was selected as one of Canada's top 100 employers and one of British Columbia's top 30 employers."



University profile

Like Top Trumps, but for universities

INSTITUTION NAME: Trinity College Dublin

NUMBER OF STUDENTS: 12,000

URL: School: http://www.cs.tcd.ie/ GV2: http://gv2.cs.tcd.ie/

CONTACT: +353 (0)1 896 1765



KEY STAFF

Dr Steven Collins, IET MSc course director and GV2 research group manager (also co-founder of Havok)

Prof Carol O'Sullivan, professor of computer graphics

KEY ALUMNI

Sean Blanchfield, CTO and co-founder, Demonware

David Gargan, principal engineer, Havok

Jonathan Rice, senior software engineer, Nvidia







Top: Dublin's O'Connell Street in the Virtual Dublin system developed by the GV2 group. Above: A GV2 researcher interacts with Virtual Dublin





LOCATION: Dublin, Ireland

COURSES OFFERED:

MSc in computer science (interactive entertainment technology)

MSc in computer science (mobile and ubiquitous computing)

MSc in computer science (networks and distributed systems)

MSc in multimedia systems

BA (Mod) in computer science

BA (Mod) in computer science, linguistics and a language

INSIDE VIEW – KEITH O'CONNOR, PHD STUDENT (NOW WORKING WITH RADICAL ENTERTAINMENT)

"I decided to pursue a PhD with the Graphics, Vision and Visualization (GV2) group in Trinity College Dublin in order to better position myself for a job in the games industry. With GV2 I was given access to the latest equipment and research that enabled me to study state of the art realtime graphics programming. I specialised in GPU technology and shader programming, as well as investigating graphics driver development with the assistance of ATi Technologies. I also participated in the development of the Virtual Human crowd rendering system with other researchers at GV2, learning important team skills while engaging in challenging and interesting work. The opportunity then arose to study and work closely with the Cell, the new multicore processor that powers the PlayStation 3. I would never have gained access to real Cell hardware so soon after its release without GV2's resources (the GV2 group works closely with IBM and was awarded a cluster of Cell-powered blades in 2006), and that exposure gave me a critical edge in the job market when I finished my studies.

"I now work as a PlayStation 3 rendering programmer at Radical Entertainment in Vancouver. It was the opportunity to study in GV2 that gave me the knowledge and experience I needed to work at a world-class studio like Radical, and to do what I love and have always wanted to do – make games."



It's all in the mind

Game controllers have gone wireless, gained motion sensitivity and accelerometers, but is brain control an innovation too far?



NeuroSky's approach to mind control uses a wired headphone-style headset which has one large sensor over the left ear. Not shown in this photo is the sensor for picking up eye muscle movement

At first thought, controlling a game with your mind might seem a little crazy. Decades of neurological research, plus a couple of high-profile medical experiments, suggest a rethink could now be in order. And that's exactly what two companies are suggesting as they try to commercialise hooking up your brainwaves to gaming.

Both the Australian-founded but now San Francisco-based Emotiv Systems and NeuroSky (located just down the road in San Jose) reckon the sensitivity of brainwave sensors, plus a combination of their hardware and software smarts, mean this most popular of science fiction technologies is almost a reality.

They back up their sales pitch with academic gravitas too. Emotiv's co-founder Allan Snyder is the director of Centre for the Mind, at the University of Sydney, while NeuroSky bases its expertise on research from Moscow National University. The companies also have plenty of backing. Emotiv has raised $6.3 million (£3.1 million) from the likes of Technology Venture Partners, Epicure Capital Partners and the Australian Federal Government.

"Brain-computer interfaces dramatically change the way players interact with a game and, as such, have a profound effect on the gaming experience. Developers are looking to this technology to take their games to another level, to differentiate their products and to retain their fans," says **Nam Do**, Emotiv's CEO. "As the massive adoption of concepts such as social networking and virtual worlds has proven, we are incorporating computer-based activities not only into the way we work, learn, and communicate but also into the way we relax, socialise and entertain ourselves. The next step is to enhance these experiences by making the way we interact with computers more lifelike. That's where Emotiv's highly disruptive technology comes in."

There are some differences between the companies' approaches, but fundamentally both are based around wearing slightly ludicrous headgear that contains brain sensors. Unlike the standard medical technology used in detecting the brain's electrical activity (known as Electroencephalography or EEG), these don't require direct contact with skin or the use of conductive gel. The main reason for this is that detecting changes in brain activity for the purposes of controlling a game doesn't need to be anything like as accurate as in medicine, and partly because it would be hard to sell technology that required you to slather your head in gunk.

What is important however is detecting fast, large-scale changes; something EEG is well suited to. Typically, such activity is defined in terms of the ratios of low-frequency alpha waves, which are present when a subject is relaxed; medium-frequency beta waves, which are associated with active concentration; and the high-frequency gamma waves triggered by problem solving and higher mental activity.

NeuroSky takes a slightly different approach with its ThinkGear sensor set-up. It looks a bit like a set of headphones with a single earpiece


Emotiv's Project Epoc is designed to distinguish between physical expressions, emotional state and conscious thoughts



When demoing conscious thought mind control, the best results appear to be gained when the players physically perform the commands, such as pushing or lifting blocks, they are trying to accomplish in-game

which contains the EEG sensor; it also has a single extended arm that touches the forehead and is used to detect electrical changes in the eye muscles – something otherwise known as an electro-oculogram. Both sets of signals are then processed using what the company calls its eSense algorithm library. It's this system that translates the electrical mush into data that can be used to trigger useful in-game commands, using internally-developed signal processing chips. NeuroSky also makes its own sensors, which it calls its dry-sensor technology to contrast with traditional gel-based systems.

Emotiv's headgear – codenamed Project Epoc – looks a bit more funky and futuristic, although it's viewed as pre-production hardware. Consisting of a skeletal frame, onto which are mounted 16 sensors, it encompasses the entire head. Also unlike NeuroSky's ThinkGear, it's a wireless technology, requiring two AA batteries to be mounted on the back so the signals can be beamed to the PC or games console.

Once again, the sensors detect the brain's EEG activity. Emotiv claims the system can also monitor the wearer's facial expressions and is able to tell the difference between winks, smiles and grimaces. Detection of dozens of distinct expressions, gestures and emotions is promised.

Processing takes place in the company's software suite, which consists of three components. The Expressiv suite takes the signals generated by the player's muscles and interprets these facial expressions. Emotiv claims this will enable developers to directly feed the player's emotional state into the behaviour of the in-game characters.

The Affectiv suite is more complex in that it directly tracks the brain's emotional state, potentially providing the ability to trigger events or music if the player is scared, ensure the player stays calm to stop their character being discovered in a stealth game, or even tailor the difficulty levels if frustrated for a certain period of time.

Finally, and most interestingly, the Cognitiv suite interprets the player's conscious thoughts. This is used to allow you to directly control in-game objects by thinking about the ways you want to manipulate them. Examples given include the ability to lift, push or pull objects; something demonstrated in Emotiv's test games. Fascinatingly, this seems to work best when the player is actually using their hands to mimic the action they're attempting in-game.

The ability to lift, push or pull objects seems to work best when the player uses their hands to mimic the action

Game developers can get access to this box of tricks via the alpha release of the Emotiv Development Kit (EDK), which enables them to match the different types of signals produced with their game's control system.

Where Emotiv and NeuroSky's technology is the same is that both require a certain training process so the algorithms that decide how the biorhythms are turned into game logic can be tuned for each individual player. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that some people will be better at forming their thoughts in a specific way so the system can recognise them.

It's these sort of soft technical issues that will need to be overcome before either system can be successfully rolled out on a commercial basis. Emotiv hopes to launch sometime in 2008, and has ex-LucasArts head of development Randy Breen on board as its chief product officer. Former Microsoft executive Ed Fries sits on the board, while EA LA's COO Arcadia Kim is an advisor. NeuroSky is working towards an 2008 deployment as well, although its plans are less focused towards games, with toys, medicine, security, interactive TV and market research also being targeted.

Still, in a gaming market that's been revolutionised by the likes of EyeToy, *SingStar*, *Buzz* and the Wii Remote, who's to say mind control won't provide another significant control innovation? Maybe the biggest obstacle to overcome will be the public's reaction to wearing the headgear itself. Whatever their strengths and weaknesses may be, at least you don't risk looking silly using a joypad or keyboard.

www.emotiv.com
www.neurosky.com

Emotiv's Project Epoc headset is still in its prototype stage, but it's expected the consumer version will also contain 16 sensors and use a full head design



YAK'S PROGRESS Notes from the game designer's workshop

SPACEFLIGHT

BY JEFF MINTER

Well, the bureaucratic phase of the *Space Giraffe* release is trundling on slowly. You could have programmed and released a couple of C64 games in the time it takes to simply get from finishing a game to having it released today. Unfortunately, the wheels of bureaucracy have not increased in speed like processors and graphics cards have.

We've just done the 'code complete' submission for *SG*; any issues that arise with that will be resolved and rolled into the next submission, which is 'content complete' (and indeed the only content that is outstanding are some strings from our translators and we should have those in a few days). Thus far the issues that have arisen in the bug reports we've had have been along the lines of "our testers haven't got their names in the credits yet," "this ratings graphic has the wrong filename," "you put Xbox Live instead of Xbox LIVE here" and such – all little niggly things really rather than anything major. The only really significant addition we were asked to make was to add two leaderboards, Weekly and Hardcore, as well as the usual All-Time, and in fact they do improve the game slightly.

Still, I'd rather be getting those kind of niggle-items given out as bugs rather than reports of misbehaviour or crashes, neither of which we've seen at all, which is good. *SG* does indeed seem to be as stable as a horse's house.

I've been off the grid for a few days down at one of the regular Retrovision events in Oxford. These started off as Llamasoftie gatherings but have grown in scope and now cover just about everything from retrogames and MAME through to big Wii sessions and lots of *Guitar Hero*, to the accompaniment of lots of drinking (they take place in a pub) and a good deal of curry. I took *SG* and we had it hooked up over most of the weekend. It was particularly interesting to me since this was the first time the giraffe has been out in public. I thought it'd be a good opportunity to see if the software would behave itself whilst being used by random users (and it behaved impeccably) but also to see how users would pick up on the new aspects of the design (and the fact that it really isn't *Tempest*, although at first glance it looks pretty similar).

I was very pleased with the response – everybody seemed to like the look and feel of the game, and nobody had anything bad to say about it. People appeared to 'get' the new features fairly readily, and I was able to watch as people played and learned and see them picking up on the important scoring methods and using them. Nobody found the game to be too hard, nobody found it to be too easy, the balance of it all appears to work as well as I had intended. All of the 360 owners there who played said that they'd be picking up a copy when it comes out, and there were even a few who said they'd be tempted to finally get a 360 once *SG* is out. It's always a good sign if people are willing to buy hardware to play your game!

> You could have programmed and released a couple of C64 games in the time it takes to get from finishing a game to release today

For me the game of the weekend (apart from *Space Giraffe* of course!) was something completely unexpected, and not anything that I think any of the gamers there would have thought to even try, had it not been brought and set up there for them. One Llamasoftie was a model plane enthusiast who has been flying models for 16 years (and is now an instructor). He brought along an absolutely excellent little simulator program for the PC in which it is possible to fly extremely realistically simulated model planes and helicopters using a controller that is exactly like that used for real model planes.

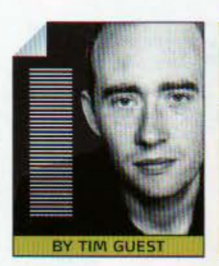
I'm sure many gamers must have thought at some time that flying those models must be quite fun and maybe even not too hard – after all we've all done OK in gaming flight sims, haven't we? But models are expensive and mistakes are expensive, and no model enthusiast in his right mind would let a gamer with zero experience try flying a real model.

And quite rightly so, as that simulator hooked up to a projector and operated by a succession of drunken gamers proved. Those things are amazingly hard to fly. It's easy to take off, maybe not too hard to fly around for a little while, but then there inevitably comes an 'oh dear' moment where you simply lose control and crash. The simulator came with a huge array of aircraft (one of the planes was even called a Yak) and smashing these to bits in a variety of interesting ways became a major source of hilarity to the extent where some of them (myself included) decided to stump up the £120 for their own copy. That sounds quite dear, but the controller is pretty fancy and the simulation is very good, to the point where the instructor said that if you learn to fly in the simulator then you'd be able to do it in real life.

I think anyone who likes games with twitchy and interesting controls would find such a simulation interesting and fun to try. If you could fly the ship well in *Virus* and enjoyed the likes of *Space Duel* and *Thrust* then I would highly recommend giving it a go.

Jeff Minter is the founder of UK codeshop Llamasoft, whose most recent project was Xbox 360's onboard audio visualiser





THE GUEST COLUMN Postcards from the online universe

JOINING THE FRONTLINE

'I have always felt I was living on the open seas, threatened, at the heart of a royal happiness,' Camus wrote, in Summer.

A life of writing books, as Camus meant, is a life spent partially at sea: you unfurl your sail, catch a strong wind, and find out where the story takes you. But, once the journey is complete, you also need to retreat into the safety of port to report on the new places – real or imaginary – you have discovered.

I can't speak for others, but for myself, my time in port – sat at my desk and crafting a piece of work – is infinitely preferable. There's so much less at stake (and also, there's Guinness). Still, at some point, you have to put yourself once again at the mercy of the winds.

I have just finished my second book, Second Lives (published by Hutchinson, available to buy by the time you're reading this), about the characters I met in my journey through virtual worlds. I had hoped to retreat for a while, but the demands of rent, and also the need to leave my house and talk to someone other than the newsagent, have brought me back out into the world in a different kind of vessel: a merchant navy ship. I've been working with a company called Rivers Run Red, who I met while writing the book, because of the radical work they're doing in virtual worlds.

I'm being disingenuous about the need to avoid my newsagent. I'm working with Rivers Run Red also because what they're doing is fascinating and new, something only half a handful of companies across the world are doing: bringing companies, media properties, brands and experiences through the electronic looking glass, into the virtual frontier of worlds like Habbo Hotel and *Second Life*. Rivers Run Red has brought brands such as Adidas, the BBC and Calvin Klein as well as banks, consultants, artists and writers into *Second Life*. And now, after having witnessed and reported them, I'm on the frontline. The challenges of building new places in a virtual world are constant: people expect their virtual selves to look exactly like them – or exactly like their younger selves – which can be difficult. Things you build one week can sometimes move the next, and residents can hold strongly conflicted opinions about bringing brands into virtual worlds (although that didn't seem to stop them buying the virtual trainers).

The current project taking up most of my time is setting up a live broadcast with Sky News from the Hay-On-Wye Festival, the literary event Bill Clinton called 'the Woodstock of the mind'. Sky News is a main sponsor for Hay, and will be broadcasting live from the event – and now, also broadcasting live from a virtual version of the Sky News Studio and Hay tent, inside *Second Life*. Virtual visitors will be able to pose questions to the real guests – including me.

> Live participation on a national news broadcast from a virtual world has never before been done, and we're beginning to see why

To my knowledge, live participation on a national news broadcast from a virtual world has never before been done, and we're beginning to see why: the challenges have yet to be solved. Broadband at Hay is limited, so we'll be running four laptops off a single DSL line. We'll need to field *Second Life* questions and relay them to the presenter, Adam Boulton, without interrupting his interview flow. It's tricky, but we'll pull it off, and it will be fun to be part of something new. The Sky News live *Second Life* broadcast will have happened by the time you read this – it was on May 27 – and hopefully you'll have seen it and will look back on it fondly knowing the troubles we had getting there.

Real-world production of virtual worlds is a rocky, exciting business – sailing choppy, energetic seas. There's always the possibility of a wreck, a reef, a shoal just under the surface. There's very little unexplored territory in the real world, no more blank gaps in the atlas, but in the new realm of virtual worlds, our maps remain sketchy.

Camus' threatened life is true of us all. Life is full of uncertainty, loss, failure and despair. Each of us hide in our own way from the possibility of pain – for a writer, this hedging of bets often takes the form of retreat. After all, writers have to first witness life, but then turn away from it to do their writing. But we all have our ways to hide. In our fear of death, we hold back from life, because life is the only thing that can kill. Like animals, we curl up into a ball and play dead, in the hope that any nearby predators will pass us by. But we always have to uncurl again, in order to live.

Life isn't just uncertainty and loss, though. It's also full of wonders and satisfactions: strange places, billowing sails, journeys completed. Live broadcasts from virtual worlds, pulled off with a wireless antenna made from a tin can, and the skin of our virtual teeth. We are all on the high seas, threatened – but, under the commercial and violent tides of modern life, it's easy to forget that we are also at the heart of a royal happiness. Life is insoluble, but there is consolation everywhere.

Tim Guest's book about virtual worlds, Second Lives, is published by Hutchinson. Visit him at timguest.net

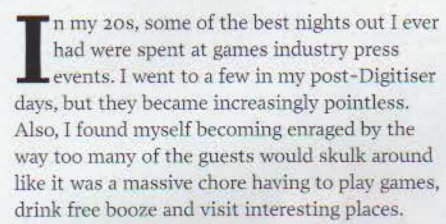


Illustration: tstokes

BY MR BIFFO

BIFFOVISION Grumble feature enabled

NOT GOING OUT



In my 20s, some of the best nights out I ever had were spent at games industry press events. I went to a few in my post-Digitiser days, but they became increasingly pointless. Also, I found myself becoming enraged by the way too many of the guests would skulk around like it was a massive chore having to play games, drink free booze and visit interesting places.

I slammed into the nadir of this attitude when sat on a coach next to a wholly charm-free guy who moaned constantly about our trip to a castle to dress up as serfs, eat roast pig and glug mead. It was quite clear that he would rather have been at home moaning about having to breathe, or lolling about on the sofa staring at the ceiling, or something.

To be perfectly honest, I've probably never come so close to strangling someone. Yes, it was pointless in the grand scheme of things, but what's the alternative? Working on the checkout at Lidl? And you can bet he still went back and gave the game a full-on 9/10.

Eventually, I stopped going to game launches for fear that I would end up killing someone, but in recent times I've started to miss those ludicrous nights out. From medieval banquets and weeks spent in LA, to a bizarre day spent in the company of the REAL Action Man, I was privileged, and I never once forgot it.

Unfortunately (for me), nobody invites me to games industry press events these days. I don't really know why – I mean, I've got a column and a blog, and everything. Perhaps they hate me, or don't think I'll turn up. Or think that I will turn up, and raise the average age of the guests to undesirable levels of un-coolness. Or perhaps they're worried that I'll do something wacky, like bring a slaughtered goat with me.

Oh, hang on... it seems that slaughtered goats are de rigeur at games industry press events these days. Indeed, it would appear that it's very much a case of 'your goat's not decapitated, you're not coming in'.

I refer, of course, to Sony's *God Of War II* launch party, details of which were splashed – splashed being the only appropriate word – across the front page of a recent Mail On Sunday. Certainly, I'd like to have witnessed the goat-slaughter/topless waitresses first hand, rather than have to rely on the Mail for my masturbatory aids, but regardless, I do find the whole thing astonishing.

Even when filtered through the Mail's journalistic moral-o-scope – which depicted a kind of bacchanalian orgy, albeit one attended by whingeing games journalists – the whole thing does seem very strange, however you dress it up.

> "Nobody invites me to games industry press events these days. I don't really know why – I've got a column and a blog"

Thing is, The Mail's story illustrated two very important truths about the games industry. Firstly, that games are a long way from being an acceptable mainstream pursuit, and will be for as long as the media continues to paint them as morally repugnant. Secondly, games will never become a mainstream pursuit, beloved of all, so long as Sony continues to host parties where the guests are asked to eat offal from the belly of a slaughtered goat, and half-naked women wander around handing out cups of fresh blood. Or whatever.

It's just further evidence – as if it were needed – that whoever is responsible for Sony' marketing these days has utterly lost the plot. Just look at the marketing of the PS3: those 'to cool for school – word up!'-style fake blogs, dubious rock concert auctions, and important opinion informers not getting invited to partie

As regular readers of this column will be all too aware, I remain to be convinced on the PlayStation 3. However, I should qualify that statement by confessing that I say this as someone who doesn't actually own one (thoug my sole PS3-owning friend doesn't recommended that I buy one).

However, my Xbox 360 has gone and spazzed up. It can't do wireless networking – and I've tried three different wireless adaptors now – and certain games freeze during play. I could send it off for some sort of repair, but that's such a hassle that I'm probably just goin to get a new one.

Now, I was having this internal debate a week or so ago, and I nearly – very nearly – crumbled, and bought a PlayStation 3. It was professional duty more than anything; I write this column, and felt I could justify it that way. But then I thought: 'No, I'm a gamer'.

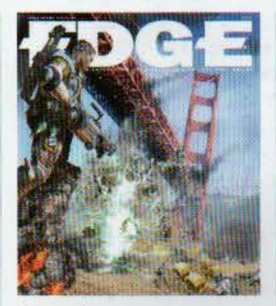
If I'm buying a PlayStation 3 out of professional obligation as a tax-free concessio then I'm buying it for the wrong reasons. I'll buy a PS3 when Sony convinces me that I need to buy a PS3. That's when I'll know, in my hear that Sony's machine has turned the corner. Ala they're some way off of doing that, and I dare say I speak for a significant proportion of the gaming market. And I loved my PS2.

Of course, such is my professional obligation, that if Sony is happy to post me a freebie console, and/or send me off to some so of lurid snuff-party-cum-orgy, then I'm happy to change that opinion in an instant.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television



Inbox


Issue 176

F
ONLINE OFFLINE
Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: Splinter Cell Conviction
Have a look at the features on this here beauty. Sam Fisher is no longer restricted to skulking round the shadows, he now has to use crowds to hide in plain sight.
I really hope he gets to hide in a laundry basket at some point. Or, for comedy purposes, he gets to try and hide behind a lamppost.
Any other ideas I can steal and send to Ubisoft?
Evil Bozz

Chair (or indeed any graspable object) throwing contests.
Mr Brooks

Sam should be able to buy an assortment of different disguises such as wigs, beards, taches, glasses, prosthetics and the like to change his appearance making this hiding in plain sight malarky easier.
TheBlackFrost

He should hide under a cardboard box, then wobble round with it on his head for ultimate comedy value.
Hang on...
Ubermod


Win a DS Lite for the best letter

I've always been a staunch fan of Nintendo and have stuck by them through thick and thin. Even at the times when it seemed cool to Nintendo-bash I was there backing them to the hilt. Previous consoles such as the N64 and GameCube had a shortage of thirdparty games and in the main had to rely on firstparty titles. I could forgive this as waiting for the next *Zelda* or *Mario* was, in the past, enough. After all – Nintendo innovates, others follow.

But now we come to the Wii – the straw which has finally broken the camel's back! I have had enough of Nintendo's shambolic release schedules and making us wait months at a time for a decent game. I bought a Wii at launch and played through *Zelda*, had a laugh on *Wii Sports*, but after that, nothing! I can't recall a decent game that's been out since or can see one in the foreseeable future. I am not prepared to wait until Christmas for *Mario Galaxy*. Minigame-based games are all well and good, but what about those that want to get stuck into a 'proper' game? Don't patronise us with *Pirates 3*, *Spider-Man 3* or rehashes of two-year-old games like *Prince Of Persia*. Yes it's sold by the bucketload, but I'm curious to see how long people can get along with *Wii Sports* and *WarioWare* before they get bored.

I'm seriously thinking of selling my Wii now as I have become completely disillusioned – Nintendo should get grip or risk losing more customers to Sony and Microsoft.
Matthew Bates

There's no doubt it's a thin line-up, but remember that the DS took a full year to get into its software stride.

"It seems that the advent of a new market has been used for little more than to exploit the consumer and prove we will pay, again and again, for old content"

A thought came to me as I was looking through **Edge** 176's preview section and came across *Resident Evil: The Umbrella Chronicles*, for Wii. It seems to me that more and more 'new' games are old games, whether they're re-releases, re-makes or, as in this case, a re-use of material. The PSP suffers from the regular criticism of being a machine for PlayStation ports, while most of the use I have had from my Wii thus far has been the Virtual Console. We're so used to the inflated prices for new games that downloadable titles often seem a good deal, but is £4 for *Joust* really value for money, or a rip off of the highest order?

It seems that the advent of a new market for games developers (or, to be more accurate, publishers) has been used for little more than to exploit the consumer and prove that in the absence of good quality new content we will pay, again and again, for old content. And who can blame them? Compared to the costs of a new title, sending out Pac-Man to hoover up the dough again must seem like a godsend.

But is it marginalising creativity even more? Live Arcade and the PlayStation equivalent at least offer original titles alongside the ports, but the *Space Giraffes* of this world are drowned under the number of arcade 'classics' available. And perhaps *The Umbrella Chronicles* is the completion of the circle: we've proved that we'll pay new money for old content. So it's only sensible that Capcom makes a new game with old content, saving the costs of scripting, art and planning and directing them towards the re-jig of the game's system. It's good news for them, but seems like the ultimate admission that these things don't matter to games, and that as long as we have buttons to push originality can go hang. I'm such a fan of the *Resi* series that I've been guilty in my time of buying some of the remakes, but with *Umbrella Chronicles* I've finally been pushed too far – no more, Capcom!
Rob Stewart

Of course, the other side of the argument is that gaming is finally maturing, with old titles being integrated into current hardware rather than abolished as obsolete – more like how old films and music are treated.

I remember with mixed emotions the Christmas I received my first games console. After fighting for hours to get a ten-minute go on my dad's beloved ZX Spectrum (well, ten minutes after the cassette loading time...) my new Sega Mega Drive was the fastest machine I had ever seen – pop in the cartridge and bingo! Games!



Sadly, I never really got a proper go – dad, granddad and brother crowding around it, hogging the controller, marvelling at the amazing graphics while I was encouraged to go away and read a book. I grew up with a slight fear of consoles – safe in the knowledge that the controller would always be taken away from me and that I would always be 'doing it wrong', but the desire to guide Mickey safely around his Castle of Illusion never quite disappeared. When I met my husband we had great times playing *Vib Ribbon* and *Bishi Bashi* on the PlayStation, and then I made the mistake of buying him a PS2. Gone were the fun times to be replaced by missions, shootings (that looked like lots of fun – I WANTED TO PLAY!) and hours and hours and hours of *FIFA*, whereupon the control was taken from my little hands and I was 'doing it all wrong' again. Then, about two months ago, I came home from work to find Darling Husband not on the beanbag in front of *Okami*, but on the sofa holding a small black box. When I asked what it was, he put it away and said I wouldn't like it. Reluctant to be chastised all over again, I resisted for days until it was there, left on the coffee table, and I had a sneaky peek. And it was great! Wario minigames, bright happy colours and cheery tunes, frustrating at times (bloody Bomberman!) but divinely satisfying – if only I could play on it! Once again it seems that the console is to be bliss purely for the man in my life, and I suppose I should be happy with



Umbrella Chronicles is the final straw for Rob Stewart. Does this recycling of ideas on to new consoles mark a new trend for the industry?

that. It bugs the crap out of me though when my husband and his friends assume that because they never see me playing, I'm obviously not into games and it makes me wonder just how many women are branded as 'disinterested' when in actual fact they are just denied the opportunity to run around shooting things while driving recklessly – more so because they don't want to have to buy pink consoles or overtly fluffy games to be granted the privilege?
Jennie Banks

"I wonder just how many women are branded as 'disinterested' when in actual fact they are just denied the opportunity to run around shooting"

Sounds like you need to invest in some of your own hardware and start showing your husband how it's done.



MotorStorm is a lot of fun, but is it reason enough by itself to buy an expensive console? Juan Sanchez certainly doesn't think so

Having witnessed the next-gen arrival in full, what strikes me most is the lack of console selling software – the killer app. Was Microsoft in that much of a hurry to launch Xbox 360 that Master Chief simply didn't matter? Where's Wii *Mario*? (Or anything else apart from *Zelda* and *Wii Sports*?) And will someone please inform Sony that *MotorStorm*, *Resistance FOM*, and *Genji* (help us, please) do not make a launch line-up. When the original DS was released it looked like a prototype despite being an excellent machine, such was Nintendo's fear of the PSP. Only since its rebirth, along with the right software, has it truly gone from strength to strength. Surely the big three (especially Microsoft) are changing formats too quickly for software to be ready at launch. The PS3 has an awful line-up of hand-me-down 360 games, some with Sixaxis use bolted on, and nothing of note on the immediate horizon.

The second issue I would like to raise is Sega's play-testers. Why did no one tell Sonic Team that their 360/PS3 creation was SO depressingly bad? Do game creators simply not care that their efforts are appalling? Especially with such a beloved icon – where's the love? Do they not realise the privilege of developing games with such historically important characters? Sort the camera, go on-rails or go 2D again – it's not that difficult, is it?

My third issue is the release of *Super Paper Mario* – what could take so long as to delay its release in Europe by about five months? Console generations come and go but Nintendo keeps on treating PAL territories like a distant relative – only bothering on special occasions. Looking forward, we have the usual summer drought before the big winter: *Halo 3*, *DMC4*, *GTA4*, *Mario*, *Smash Bros*, *Metroid* – those games would have made their respective console launches exactly what they should have been: all about the games.
Juan Sanchez

Nintendo's treatment of Europe is light years better than it once was, even if text-heavy games like *Paper Mario* do still lag behind even the US release.



Topic: The puppet's strings

A lot of areas of gaming are completely unrealistic but continue on due to gaming conventions and probably the lack of computing power. One of these areas is hand to hand combat. Usually fighting consists of your character going through a set of predetermined kicks and punches or perhaps a canned grapple animation once you push the grapple button.

Well step forward *Splinter Cell*. For anyone that hasn't heard about the new game there has been a few big changes in theme but what I'm more interested in is the interaction between sam and objects and people within the game. Objects are given what are known as handles, these are points which you would naturally grab to pick up or hold an object. These handles are also present on the NPCs. If Sam goes to grab a chair the animations will work on the fly giving a smooth realistic animation. Why am I excited about this? Well its so automatic, he will act as you would expect him to. Every time a character doesn't act correctly you are always reminded that you are in a game. Even simple things like bumping into people who produce the same canned animation in *GTA* jar the sense. That little problem is being tackled in *Splinter Cell* and *Assassin's Creed*.
Scotswahey

Graphics really can't ever be good enough as far as I'm concerned. I really want real pouring flowing water and Hydrophobia looks like a step in the right direction there.

Smoke still looks fairly shit, *COD2* had some nice-ish smoke, but it was just scaling 2D textures of smoke, so just smoke and mirrors there... *wince*

I'd love to see smoke that hangs, clings, rolls and drifts. Air density/current is maybe the next thing I'd like to see modelled well. Dynamic animation that LucasArts is pushing looks incredible and I think will revolutionise games within two to three years.
Turtle O Wurtle

There's been a lot of sombre meditation by developers, journos and readers alike on how games fail to live up to the full potential of the storyteller's art in recent editions of **Edge**, and I'm so bored of it I'd thought I'd pitch in and try to lighten the mood.

First, plot exposition in games has been characterised by two historical phases: in the late 1970s to the late 1990s it was: 'I must kill the baddies to achieve my goal'. And from the late 1990s to the present it has become: 'I think I must kill the baddies to achieve my goal, but I'm not really sure. Maybe I'll kosh, drug, choke or hoodwink them instead. At least until I make up my mind. Or until I get bored and pick up the gun again.'

The earlier era required almost no plot exposition: sprites jerk down screen; kill sprites. The current one requires complex tricks like the

Continued

unreliable narrator, a fragmentary and drip-fed plot, flashbacks/forwards, etc. By deploying such devices, the acknowledged plot-driven classics of *Sons Of Liberty*, *Second Sight*, *Killer 7* (I omit *Deus Ex* as it spoils the neatness of my model) have been able to attain all the sophistication of the technique mastered instinctively by every schoolchild: "I woke up and it was all a dream." Or psychotic delusion. Or VR illusion. Or the bosses were lying. Nothing wrong with that, of course. Even Aristotle thinks Oedipus Rex is just an elaborate version of the same: "Who is she, again?!"

The trouble with this is that the successfully conflicted player should find spoiling the erstwhile baddies' day just as unconscionable as murder. Every gamer a Hamlet. Let the pretty Colossi roam. At which point, games cease being an interactive medium and become as dreary as the most heavyweight eastern European novel



Topic: Genre cross-pollination

RTSes which can be played out in firstperson.

Firsperson shooters with 3D platforming parts; puzzle parts; driving sections; thirdperson switches.

Are we heading towards an 'everything' game? Is that what sandbox inevitably leads to?

Dr Gonzo

I don't think we're heading towards homogenisation of game genres, I believe we are already there. Most modern mainstream games share ideas/ mechanics like some pixellated '70s key-party.

Marshallstaxx

***Crackdown* was the best thirdperson shooter platform racing game ever, fact!**

Bombfrog

you might care to name-drop. I suspect, however, that one is never intended to question one's motives fully, but rather to enjoy a delicious (pretentious word, should be reserved for food) pang of doubt before one sledges Little Sister with the wrench again. And alas, as everyone knows, it is these expectations that are responsible for the interminable delays in *Duke Nukem Forever*: a team of crack screenwriters are working around the clock in order to find a plausible way to re-write the Dukester as a simpering, self-doubting pacifist.

But maybe there are other ways of refreshing the killing genre without resorting to yet more elaborate ways to make the player feel guilty for playing? Why not just make the baddies all the more deserving of extravagant slaughter? Waxed moustaches, cackling and maidens lashed to railways tracks should do it.

Before I go: I was reassured to learn that the BBFC give a whopping five hours of playtime before arriving at an age-rating. Wish they'd devote a fraction more, though: 35 hours into *Okami* and only now are Issun's sordid boob fetish and Amaterasu's scatological attacks being revealed. 12+?! I am appalled.

Simon Richards

There's no doubt that games with a conscience can be more wearing than games without, even if they are easier to defend. Maybe that should be the initial option you pick, rather than Eas or Hard. Or, you could play DS games instead – on this month's Lite – wher the moral landscape is a little sunnier.

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